

ALL-STORY
WEEKLY

*Lose
Yourself
in*

The Labyrinth

by Francis Stevens

Author of "The Nightmare," etc.

ALL-STORY WEEKLY

VOL. LXXXVI

NUMBER 4



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ALL-STORY WEEKLY

VOL. LXXXVI

NUMBER 4



SATURDAY, JULY 27, 1918



The Labyrinth

by Francis Stevens

Author of "The Nightmare," etc.

CHAPTER I.

BAD NEWS BEFORE BREAKFAST.

RISING to the extent of a supporting elbow, I viewed my early caller with one eye—the other was still asleep. Rex Tolliver had the entry of my rooms at all hours, but it didn't seem nice in him to take advantage of that fact to break my sweet slumbers in the early dawn. So far as I am concerned, that is any time before 11.30 A.M.

"Great Scott, Hil, haven't you any heart at all?" demanded the ruthless one. "I thought she was just about the same as a sister to you."

I shook my head sleepily.

"Numberless booful ladies have promised to be sisters to poor little orphan Hildreth. Which she is it? And why the excitement?"

Rex dropped into a chair.

"Then you haven't heard?"

"I heard that chair. If you love me, spare my furniture. No man of your weight and temperament ought to—"

"Hil, for Heaven's sake! It's Ronny I'm speaking of—your cousin, Veronica Wyndham!"

My eyes opened suddenly.

"What are you talking about? Ronny's all right."

1 A-S

"She is? Then you know what has become of her? Where is she?"

"At home—or at the office, more likely. They have such unearthly ideas about early rising."

"Oh, is she? Is she? Well, just glance at those head-lines and then—go back to sleep, since you're so darned indifferent."

He flung a badly crumpled newspaper on the bed and stalked gloomily over to the window, where he stood looking out, his back expressive of condemnatory scorn.

But I was not in the least indifferent to anything concerning the only cousin I ever really loved.

Those head-lines, in which her name appeared in letters of glaring size and sinister hue, got me out of bed and into my clothes quicker than anything else in the world could have done.

VERONICA WYNDAM VANISHES SUDDENLY.

Former Secretary of Governor Goes and Leaves
No Trace.

FIANCÉE OF SOCIETY MAN.

Feared She Has Been Spirited Away—Police
Search Vainly.

I cast a hasty glance down a whole column of "It is said" and "Supposed to

haves," but having known a few reporters, I had no desire to waste time in acquiring misinformation. I reached for my clothes with one hand and my shoes with the other, not stopping to ring for Billings. As I projected myself into them I shot a series of Sherlockian questions at Tolliver which disabused him of any idea of my indifference.

His answers were not particularly helpful. The last time he had seen my cousin had been three days previous—that was Monday—and he had taken her to the theater. He went on for five minutes before I realized that what he was saying had nothing to do with her disappearance, but was in the nature of self-reproach because he had disagreed with her about the play. She liked it and he didn't, and it was too Ibsenesque with the Ibsen left out, but now he wished he'd kept still about it, and—

I was dressed by that time. Shaving could wait.

"Never mind Ibsen," I broke in. "Did you see her home that night?"

"Did I—say, Wyndham, would I be likely to leave her in the street? Of course I saw her home, and she was so annoyed over that confounded argument that she would scarcely say good-night. That's what hurts most. We parted in anger, and now—"

"That's how you and I will part, if you can't come down to brass tacks and tell me exactly what has happened. You saw her three days ago—no very long time. How do you know she has disappeared? Maybe she has gone off on a visit or something."

"No, she hasn't. Do you think *she* would leave her work at loose ends, that way? Carpenter kept it dark—confound him! Only phoned me last night, and said he thought she and I might have eloped. The blamed fool! Why the dickens should we elope? It seems she didn't go to the office Tuesday morning."

"You're sure she reached home all right Monday night?"

"Look here, Wyndham, do you think I had her kidnaped? If you do, come right out and say so; don't beat about the bush."

I stared at him.

"No; I don't think you had her kidnaped. I want to know if you left her at the street entrance or went up to the apartment with her."

"Oh! Well, I've been talking with 'steen detectives who have all asked the same question—where did I leave her. It's got on my nerves. I took her up, of course, but Mrs. Sandry had retired, so I didn't go in. Besides, she didn't ask me."

Mrs. Sandry was the nice old lady who shared Ronny's apartment and played chaperon. For all her independence, Ronny was a great little stickler for the conventions. Hence, when she went on her own and acquired an apartment, she also went in partnership with Mrs. Sandry.

"Carpenter called up her place," continued Rex, "when she failed to show up at the office or telephone. Mrs. Sandry told him that Ronny wasn't there—that she had not come home, and was supposed to have spent the night at Anne Lacroix's house. Ronny had told Mrs. Sandry that she and I were to meet Anne and her husband for supper after the show, and that she might go home with them. So Carpenter took it for granted that she had done that, and that something had delayed her. He never called up the Lacroix house till late in the afternoon. Of course she wasn't there. Anne was ill, and they never kept their appointment with us."

"Then, instead of notifying the police, Carpenter went up to see Mrs. Sandry. They talked it over and made up their fool minds to wait another day before starting anything. That is, Carpenter made up his own mind and the old lady's, too. I know what ailed him, and I'll square that account before the finish. He was afraid of any scandal in connection with his precious office."

"Then yesterday afternoon—*yesterday afternoon*, mind you, two whole nights and nearly two days after she had disappeared—he had the nerve to call me up and ask me if we had eloped. Oh—"

"Forget Carpenter. Have you told the police?"

"Have I—say, isn't it in all the papers? Didn't I tell you that I have been badgered by detectives ever since?"

"Well, why didn't you come to me last night? I was here—got in on the 5.10. And why haven't any enterprising journalists been around to look me up? Every one knows Ronny and I are related, and—yes, there it is, head of another column. 'Beautiful young woman is a cousin of the well-known millionaire clubman, Hildreth Wyndham.' Whenever I am dragged into print it's always in the millionaire class. Those boys are so generous. But why haven't any of 'em been around?"

"Hang your egotism! You'll find a dozen reporters drifting about the corridors. That man of yours wouldn't wake you for them."

"Good old Bill—but this time I wish he had. What have the police done?"

"Talked—talked—talked! And hinted things, and asked things, and made insulting insinuations. The only wonder is I didn't turn loose and murder a few of them!"

"Detectives are supposed to ask questions—just like children. I'm going to see Mrs. Sandry."

I had reached the conclusion that nothing useful could be extracted from Tolliver until he had calmed down a bit. In vulgar parlance, he was "rattled," and badly.

"They won't let you see Mrs. Sandry," he asserted with bitter gloom.

"Who won't? Don't tell me they've arrested Mrs.—"

"Of course not. She is in bed with a nurse in attendance. When I went there this morning I met the doctor coming out, and he said her blood-pressure was two hundred and her pulse—some outrageous speed, and if she isn't kept perfectly quiet there is danger of cerebral hemorrhage."

"Poor old lady! Ronny was as dear to her as a daughter."

"Don't use the past tense that way! She isn't—she isn't—"

"No, certainly she isn't. Come along, old man. We'll begin with Carpenter, then."

"You may, if you like. If I go near him just now, there'll be bloodshed."

"I see. Don't suppose you slept much last night? Not at all? I thought so. Your car outside? Lend it to me; I'll

drop you at Hanready's, and be around again after you in a couple of hours. Then you'll be fit to help make use of any news I run across meantime."

Naturally my plan, being a sensible one, didn't appeal to Tolliver's mood of frenzy. At last I told him frankly that if he wouldn't fall in with it, I should have nothing more to do with him—at least, until I found Veronica. Then he yielded to reason.

It was not that he had any deep respect for my sleuthing ability. That was an unknown quantity, since never before had I suffered the loss of anything more dear to me than a sleeve-link. No, it was the fact that I was Ronny's nearest living relative. We three had chummed around together a lot ever since he made her acquaintance, which was, by the way, through my friendly and cousinly offices.

So he saw reason at last, and we went down to the street, besieged all the way by the cohorts of Misinformation Row. Their pleas for attention were pathetic. Knowing, however, their imaginative powers, I wasted no time nor sympathy on them. Even if I had had anything to tell, they could have invented something much more exciting.

We reached Tolliver's big touring-car at last, and five minutes later pulled up in front of Hanready's. Rex went in to the Turkish baths with the air of a man walking into the mausoleum of all his dearest dead, but I hoped for the emergence of a saner man when I should return that way.

I hadn't stopped for breakfast, and didn't intend to. "Carpenter first," I decided, springing into the driver's seat, for Tolliver had been driving his own car. "After that—we'll see."

CHAPTER II.

TWIN COUSINS.

MY frenzied friend spoke not beside the mark when he said that Veronica occupied a sisterly place in my affections. She and I had played and quarreled and gone about together ever since

our romper days. For anything to happen to Ronny hit me just about the same as if we had been twins, instead of first cousins.

Our fathers were two English brothers, who came to America in their hopeful youth. They drifted part way West, married and settled down in Marshall City at the mining-camp stage of its career, when it looked as much like the future State capital as a two-mustang-power buck-board looks like a De Luxe-Rollinson Eight. They came in with the "first families," and grew up with the city.

My mother died at my birth, and my aunt mothered Ronny and me without partiality, until she, too, was taken. We were both the only children of our parents, and by the time of which I write, both orphans, though with one more or less important difference.

Dad left me enough of the indispensable to keep me indefinitely from the sorrows of toil. Ronny's father, however, died a bankrupt, a deed of which no one had suspected him capable. My cousin was left with nothing but a heritage of brains, from which not even the bankruptcy courts could separate the poor girl.

Naturally, I went straight to her and offered to divvy up, but all she would take was a loan. On that capital she started to make her own way in the world. Fortunately she had learned stenography and played private secretary to her father for a year before he died. Carpenter & Charles, real estate, took her on at a salary of ten per. One year later she was dragging down thirty, and old Carpenter wondered how he had ever run the business without her.

Charles wasn't around the office much then. He had just been elected Governor on the People's ticket, and before that his duties as State Senator made it necessary for him to leave the business in his partner's hands, to a great extent.

A while after he had taken his oath of office, Charles blew into the real-estate emporium with the melancholic complaint that there was no such thing in the world as a personal secretary who could do one hour's real work in less than three hours'

time. He played on his poor old partner's sympathies so that Carpenter offered to "lend" him Miss Wyndham until some one else showed up. Charles had already "hired and fired" six ambitious young men.

Ronny appeared five years less than her reverend twenty-two, and of the ornamental rather than the useful type. Mr. Governor looked his doubts, and of course that settled it for Ronny. She's a thoroughbred. Just tell her, "This is past your abilities," and she'll fly the hurdle or break her neck attempting it.

So a young and fair Wyndham was installed in the executive mansion at the desk six times vacated, and I fancy Charles's doubts were dissipated before the end of three days' tenure. After a while Carpenter wanted her back, but Charles put him off. For nearly a year her successor failed to materialize, and at the end of that time she quit of her own accord.

I was glad of it, for all that year she owned few idle hours to waste on little Hildreth, and I missed her confoundedly. I took it for granted that she left to save herself from nervous breakdown. Clinton Charles was a notorious slave-driver, and that he drove himself harder than any one else must have been small consolation to those around him. So back she went to the real-estate office.

Carpenter was delighted, I was delighted, Ronny herself seemed pleased. Every one was happy, except, probably, the Governor, who had again to take up the elusive trail of an efficient secretary.

During that year I had joined the "Idle Sportsmen." It was the "Idle" which attracted me, I suppose, but the name was a fraudulent misnomer. I was the only member of that club who didn't rise at least an hour before eight o'clock, breakfast, and perform a lot of acrobatic stunts with dumb-bells and exercisers and things. And they all shot, and rode, and boxed, and fenced, and set up physical prowess as their little platinum idol.

Of course they soon found me out. In fact I was such a *rara avis* in their set that they took to me as a novelty. I remained a member and made quite a number of

friends among the strenuous ones. However, the only man with whom I became really intimate was Rex Tolliver, and that was after I presented him to Veronica.

Since she was back with Carpenter, who closes his office at four, gaieties were resumed among the Wyndhams. That is, she accepted my escort to dance, opera, or play; blew around the country in my car, and generally conspired with me to make sad the hearts of a number of young chaps not lucky enough to be her near-brothers—and wouldn't have been if they could.

Veronica did not remain a poor working-girl for lack of matrimonial chances.

Then Rex met her, and that was his immediate Waterloo. The Idle Sportsmen saw him no more, except on such occasions as he could not bestow his company upon my cousin. This did not surprise me, but Veronica's own behavior did. I had seen her pass out charming indifference to so many of my sex that I had begun to think her matrimony-proof.

From the first she seemed to take quite a kindly interest in Tolliver. He was a hale, good-looking young fellow, who took out his surplus energy in athletics, and had so clean a record all around that my brother-cousinly watchfulness could find no fault in him. I had always supposed that if Veronica should marry, she would pick out some human dynamo like Charles, with lofty brows and a fatal inability to loaf. However, opposites, etc., and it wasn't six months after meeting that their engagement was announced.

In Marshall City a girl does not necessarily lose her social position just because she has to work for her living. We are not New York. About fifteen hundred miles far from it. Marshall City society took just as much interest in Ronny's engagement as if her father had never lost his grip, and old Tolliver was delighted. Said he had heard of Miss Wyndham's abilities from Carpenter, and a girl who could handle Clinton Charles's work, not to mention Carpenter's, ought to be an ideal housekeeper.

I don't follow his analogy, but he said it. My cousin gave notice at the office.

Carpenter was heart-broken, but resigned. The minister was chosen. The trousseau was preparing. I was to give away the bride, and Rex Tolliver was the most fatuously happy young dub in Marshall City. That was the prospect of last Saturday, when I had left town for a few days' fishing up-river.

Exactly what were the prospects of this Thursday had yet to be discovered, but as I sailed up Chisholm Street in Rex's car I felt like a very determined little discoverer. Lazy I may be, but there are circumstances which can prod me into desperate displays of unsuspected energy. I was going to find Ronny, if I had to search every home in Marshall City from cellar to garret, and I knew that Rex Tolliver was fully as determined.

CHAPTER III.

DESPAIR AND SUSPICIONS.

AS a giver of clues, Carpenter proved a barren failure. I had always thought him a kindly old boy, who regarded my cousin with almost paternal pride and affection. Now I discovered that his pride was that of a man who owns a unique and efficient machine, and rejoices in the envy of his fellows.

He welcomed me with bitter complaints about the "scandal," and how embarrassing it would be for Governor Charles to have such a scandal come up in connection with an employee of his business firm, who had also been his secretary *pro tempore*, and how this scandal would never have got in the papers save for Tolliver's impetuosity.

At the third repetition of the word "scandal" my well-known good humor forsook me. I reminded Mr. Carpenter that Miss Wyndham was my cousin, that she was just about the finest and straightest girl who ever wasted her abilities on the work of a money-grubbing, land-grabbing, soulless bundle of moral cowardice who walked on two legs like a man, and that he had best be extremely careful what he said about the matter. Otherwise the firm of Carpenter & Charles might find itself

facing notoriety of another sort in the shape of a libel suit.

Somewhat breathless and distinctly warm under the collar, I emerged from the Real Estate Trust Building and turned next to police headquarters.

There they were civil enough. When the police have no news and the family come around inquiring, they are always civil. Of course they don't need to go so long on politeness if they have something practical to show for their efforts. I know this now, but then I was at first quite pleased.

The chief was all consideration and assurances that everything possible was being done. They were already, he said, in possession of several promising clues. The nature of these clues he would not divulge, however, lest some one be "put wise" who at present regarded himself as entirely unsuspected.

I did not quite like this talk of a mysterious "some one" in the masculine gender. It hinted at suspicions and innuendos of which I wished, above all things, to keep the case clean and free. I suggested to the chief, somewhat dolefully, that Veronica might have gone down again to the street after Tolliver left her, perhaps in order to post a letter. Then she might have been murdered for her rings and purse and her body weighted and dropped in the Hawkeye River.

Or (and this I considered a rather brilliant inspiration) she might have been kidnapped in connection with some political matter. Governor Charles was at that time engaged in a bitter fight, in which he and the "Reform" party were lined up against the railroads, backed by a coalition of Senators who disgraced the State. Politics are a bore, but no man who read the papers could avoid knowing that much. Might not his former secretary have possessed information which, if it could be extracted from her by terrorization, would be a weapon in the hands of Charles's opponents?

The chief eyed me pityingly. Then he replied that either hypothesis was of course possible, but that they were about equally improbable.

The Aldine Apartments faced on Faragut Place. The street was boulevarded and lined with trees, like almost every residence street in the city. But it was well lighted, and there was a policeman on that beat who swore that no deed of violence could have taken place there between the hours of twelve (when Tolliver left her) and eight, when the patrolman was relieved.

As for political intrigue—well, the chief laughed outright. Acts of violence attributed to low-grade politicians and the "Ring" were mostly worked up by the boys of newspaper row. There was nothing to it. Besides, it was six months since Miss Wyndham had left the Governor. Anyway, was it likely that he would put very important State secrets in the hands of a young lady of twenty-two or three?

Knowing Ronny, I thought just that was possible. And ignorant though I was, no one could hang halos over the heads of our railroad magnates and expect me to believe those halos more refined than pure brass.

However, I saw that to persuade the chief of this would take more time than I had years to live, and would hardly be worth while at that. So I bade him farewell and went straight to the Aldine Apartments.

Tim, the elevator-boy, knew me—naturally. He had seen me there often enough. He reminded me that, since the Aldine did not boast two shifts of employees on its elevator, and since he, Tim, went off duty at 10 P.M., you after that hour walked up—or down, as the case might be.

I had known this, but it had slipped my mind. I might have realized that so important a witness as the elevator-boy—supposing him to have been present—would not have been overlooked by the police.

Common humanity forbade my trying to see Mrs. Sandry. I retired from the Aldine and started the car, just in time to evade attention from an alert-looking young man whom I recognized as Brownley, of the *Evening Bulletin*.

Discovering that my two hours had expired, and not wishing to keep poor Tolliver in suspense, I ran straight back to the baths.

As I swung into Chisholm Street, from its termination a few squares distant the Capitol stared me in the face. It is not such a big building, but beyond doubt it is beautiful. The charm of its gleaming white pillars and the exquisite curves of its dome held little appeal to my anxious sensibilities just then, but the sight of it reminded me of Charles.

Would it be worth while, I wondered, to try for an interview with the Governor? Could he know of anything which might account for his former secretary's murder or abduction?

While not enjoying his personal acquaintance, I had of course more than once seen him, and even attended a couple of banquets where he was a guest. Clinton Charles had not impressed me as a person who would like to be bothered by anxious young men seeking their kidnaped cousins. He had the broad brows and the deep-set eyes of a dreamer, but the squarish chin and firm mouth of a man of determinative action. He fairly irradiated personality, but it was of an energetic sort. I felt that unless a man had business with him very pertinent to the Governor's own activities, he might better keep off and let Charles alone.

Besides, now I came to think of it, the Governor must read the papers. If he knew anything that would be helpful in tracing Veronica, he would surely come forward with it. That would be common decency, and by reputation Clinton Charles was personally a model of all the virtues. Even his muck-raking opponents had never succeeded in "getting anything" on the Governor. No man of that kind would allow his one-time assistant to languish in captivity, when a word of his might free her: or, if she had been murdered, bring vengeance on the criminals.

Not a bit of use bothering Charles, I decided, and just then arriving at my goal, I saw Tolliver coming down the steps to meet me. He did look more himself, but when he heard the negative result of my efforts his face fell. He climbed heavily into the seat beside me.

"I went over all *those* places," he growled scornfully. "When you left me

I thought you had something different up your sleeve."

"What could I have?"

"Well, you really know her better than any one else does. Hasn't there been anything in the past which could account for this?"

"Meaning anything, or any one?" I asked in a very quiet, even voice.

"I mean either." Tolliver looked straight ahead of him with a sullen set to his jaw that I did not like. As he said, I knew Veronica; but I had made Tolliver's acquaintance less than a year ago. There might be qualities in his disposition of which I was ignorant. For instance, unreasoning jealousy.

"You had better tell me just what you mean, Tolliver, if you wish an intelligent answer."

"You know what I mean."

"Perhaps—I—do." And with that I stopped the car and jumped out.

"What is it? Where are you going?"

Rex forgot his sullenness in dismay.

"Going it alone," I retorted quietly. "I believe I'd rather, since your affection for my cousin is of that quality."

"Why, Hil, old man, what did I say to start you off like that? Ronny is everything in the world to me—you know that. For God's sake, don't misunderstand me. Get back in the car here."

I did, for his protests were so excited that people were beginning to stare at us.

We went on, and Rex proceeded to explain in detail. He had meant only that Veronica might in the past have known some one who was sufficiently crazy about her to abduct or even do away with her, driven to it by her impending marriage.

"That's very unlikely," I pointed out.

"If you are going to set the police on the trail of every man who has wished he stood in your shoes, you'll have half the male portion of our set in jail. Don't you realize that such a thing mustn't even be hinted at? Do you want *that* sort of surmise circulated through the papers—about your future wife?"

He turned rather pale.

"No!" he gasped, and I knew that I had shut him up effectually on this score.

After all, Tolliver was reduced to the point of desperation, and having reached that stage a man can't be held responsible for his thoughts. A lover out of the past would be just the torture conjured up by such despair. I forgave Rex, and set my mind at the task of thinking up new coverts wherein might lurk some news of my missing cousin.

CHAPTER IV.

ANOTHER FORMER SECRETARY.

WELL, we skated around all day in Rex's car, both spreading and imbibing gloom among various friends and acquaintances. All of them were considerably excited over the news.

One girl—Janet Williams, it was, daughter of Harrison Williams, who owns every taxicab in Marshall City—had given a sewing-bee for charity on Tuesday night. She had expected Ronny to be present, and when she did not appear Janet "just knew that something awful had happened to her." Wonderful thing, these after-the-event premonitions.

But at least Janet had done something practical toward finding her friend. She had instructed her obedient father to interview every one of his taxi-drivers and question them. If that brought forth no information, each of them was to keep his ears wide open to pick up any scrap of conversation which might be let fall by his passengers in transit. The idea was that the criminals might be run to earth among the giddy patronizers of such vehicles.

I foresaw an alarming series of taxi collisions. A man can hardly drive circumspectly and at the same time keep one ear firmly glued to the little window behind him. Also that if I had to ride in a taxi I was going to be careful what I said.

Her father had consented to offer fifty dollars reward to the man who brought him any valuable information. Tolliver and I looked at each other in disgust. The disgust was for ourselves, not Williams. The obvious wisdom of offering a reward had neither occurred nor been suggested to us.

With a hurried commendation for Janet's enterprise, we hastened to put that matter right at once.

In the last edition of the evening papers any crooks interested might read that "the family" of Miss Veronica Wyndham would be glad to pay one thousand dollars for information which should lead to the discovery of her whereabouts. I, the family in question, wanted to multiply that niggardly sum by at least twenty-five, and Rex was with me to the limit of what he could extract from father.

But just after we left Janet's we met up with one Harvey Jenkins, who discouraged our munificent intentions. Jenkins was chief advertising man for Farlingham, Inc., the mail-order people, and an old friend of dad's.

"You boys have the right idea, but the wrong method," he said when we had told him our plan. "There's a psychology of rewards just as there is of selling stoves and furniture. If a man thinks he can earn, say, five hundred dollars by sleuthing around a bit and investigating his own neighborhood, he'll do it if he has to suspect lifelong friends. But twenty-five thousand, or even ten, will paralyze his imagination. It's like offering to sell him a dining-room suite for fifty cents. He can't see it—thinks there's a trick somewhere. You offer five hundred, and you'll have 'em all working for you."

"But," I protested, "we weren't thinking of amateur sleuths. We were driving at the criminals themselves."

"In the first place, these criminals of yours are supposititious. In the second, if any one is holding her to ransom, then they'll certainly let you hear from them. And if you offer anything enormous to start with, you'll never get off with any twenty-five thousand. Take a tip and start with five hundred."

We couldn't quite agree on that, but compromised on the thousand aforesaid.

Then there wasn't anything to do. The only private detective agency in Marshall City is a joke, and not even a practical one. They couldn't find a lost dog if the unfortunate canine came and howled out-

side the agency door. We didn't bother with them, and so, after offering the reward, as I say, there seemed nothing more we could do. It was horrible, intolerable, maddening, but for the life of us neither Rex nor I could think of a next step.

We had seen all her friends. They knew nothing. An impertinent, prying plainclothes man had gone through poor Ronny's private correspondence. It was innocent of clues as so much blank note-paper. Mrs. Sandry was still in a critical condition, but she knew nothing. If she had, she could never have concealed it from Carpenter. The dear old lady was no secret-keeper.

Two interminable days dragged past. By Saturday, however, we could have kept busy enough if we had followed up every one of the "clues" which were turned in to me and to the police by those ambitious to acquire that thousand.

Jenkins was right. We began to think that every man, woman, and child in Marshall City was working for us, and also that we dwelt in a city of imbecile optimists.

Some of those clues—but the people were no worse than the police, and I can prove it. Sunday morning Rex came around in the early morn, as had become his habit, and informed me with deep disgust that he was being "shadowed." On looking out the window at said "shadow," I agreed that he was an unmistakable plainclothes man.

I agreed with Tolliver that this was too much, even though he was the last person to see Veronica. He and I went straight to the chief, and Rex produced so many alibis to account for his every movement after leaving her, and for the next two days, that the shadow was withdrawn—without apologies, for, said the chief:

"You yourself admit that you quarreled at parting. Sorry, but you know we have to suspect every one. Our business. It's the respectable ones who do the craziest things—sometimes."

"Cheer up, Rex," I consoled him later. "At least, he said you were respectable—by inference."

"How the deuce can you make a joke

of it?" complained Tolliver. "It seems to me, Wyndham, that you take the whole business very light-heartedly."

That was unkind and not true, but one must make allowances for a man in Rex's place. I let it go at that. Anyway, I could appreciate his feelings.

That was Sunday, and already excitement had calmed down too much to suit me. If Tolliver thought me light-hearted, I accused the world of positive jubilation. Who, except Rex and I, and—yes, probably Mrs. Sandry—really cared about Ronny? To whom else was she indispensable, or who felt that her loss was so intolerable that life might as well stop short because of it? Answer: Nobody. Popularity is all very well, but—

With such melancholy meditations did I while away two hours of Sunday afternoon in my own rooms. Rex was off investigating one of the innumerable clues which our offer had brought forth. The police sorted out a few, and cast the rest aside with professional scorn. This was one of the outcasts. Rex was looking it up more to keep busy than for any other reason, while I stayed at home to receive that longed-for phone call from the chief.

At last it occurred to me that some part of my hopeless depression might be traced to another cause than the indifference of a cruel world to my sorrow. I rang for Billings.

"Bill," said I, "you are letting me starve to death. Is that right?"

"You never eat luncheon here, sir."

"And so, quite naturally, you supposed that I never eat it anywhere. Next time—if there ever is a next time—that I remain with you for any considerable period, you may serve luncheon exactly four hours after breakfast—whenever that may be."

"Yes, sir. I'll have it ready in—"

"No, you won't. I am deeply hurt, and I'm going to the Blue Thimble round the corner. If any one phones while I am out, you may call me there."

Billings looked not the least impressed by my displeasure.

"I'll attend to the phone, sir," he promised. "It certainly is dull waiting around this way. Wish there was anything I could

think of to help you find the poor young lady."

"So do I. If Mr. Tolliver comes in, send him around to the Thimble."

The Blue Thimble is a little café where the food is as good as the name is ridiculous. The name suggests sewing circles and tea parties, but as a matter of fact it is a strictly bachelor resort, with a grill and a chef who graduated from the best hotel in paradise, and descended upon earth to bless it.

I found my favorite table vacant, and seating myself, considered the menu. The little café was almost empty, as I knew it would be at that hour of Sunday afternoon, and I was glad to see that none of my acquaintances were present. I was tired of shallow sympathy and unmeaning condolences. "It's a shame, old fellow. You thought a lot of her, didn't you? Have you heard that Jim is entering Peterkin III at the bench show? Some bull-pup. Peterkin."

Of course they weren't all that bad, but the spirit was there. They had passed through their brief spasm of emotion over Ronny's disappearance, and now they wanted to be done with it and get on to something interesting and really vital.

So, when I saw Fred Dalton entering, saw him observe me with a happy smile, and then bear down upon my table, I felt less pleased than I should. Of course by the time he reached me said happy smile had been modified to a doleful grin. Good of him to consider my feelings.

"Any news?" he asked, as he seated himself and accepted a menu from the waiter.

"Yes, they say the Governor will veto the Gratz bill."

He looked at me with pained surprise.

"I meant about your cousin—Miss Wyndham."

"Oh! No, we haven't heard anything."

He gave his order, then turned again to me.

"Too bad. But nothing ever hits you very hard, eh, Wyndham? Wish I had your happy disposition."

At least I had headed off the "You thought a lot of her, didn't you, etc."

"Nothing ever hits me at all," I retorted. "I thought you'd be more interested in the Governor himself—having worked with him."

Dalton flushed slightly. He was one of Ronny's six predecessors at the secretarial desk.

"I lasted a month," he said defensively. "I wouldn't have kept on if he had wanted me to. Say, that man ought to have forty personal secretaries, instead of one. Your cousin must have been a wonder to stick it out so long. I hear he almost wept when she left him."

"Yes—the same as Carpenter. Hated to lose a first-class machine. Fine firm, Carpenter & Charles."

"What's the matter with you to-day? It's not like you to carry a grouch. As for Charles, you can't blame him for regretting one person who could keep up with his infernal energy."

Dalton laughed suddenly.

"Tell you what, Wyndham, if any one has kidnaped your cousin, I'll bet it's the Governor. He's probably got her hid away somewhere in durance vile, making her attend to his correspondence."

That was too much for me. I gave him leave to be indifferent, but not to make a joke of it. I beckoned the waiter and asked for my check.

"You haven't finished," protested Dalton reproachfully. "Why, Wyndham, am I driving you away?"

"Certainly not." Dalton's nothing but a good-natured, harmless kid. His reddening face made me feel like a brute. I told him that I was half-sick when I came in and worse now, asked him to dine with me next week at the Sportsmen's, and returned to Billings and the happy occupation of awaiting a message that never came.

Rex didn't show up at all. About ten o'clock he phoned me that he had followed his clue clean out in the country, and run it to earth in the Park View Asylum. The "abducted" lady turned out to be a person of large avordupois and few facial charms, who had gone mad over the death of a cherished pug-dog, her companion of fifteen years' standing.

While touched by this sad episode, I

agreed with Rex that the police were right. The clue had been hardly worth following.

CHAPTER V.

A CALL ON THE GOVERNOR.

THAT night I dreamed outrageously, perhaps because I had eaten so little.

I hunted for Ronny through enormous houses, whose corridors had no ending, and whose doors possessed a nasty habit of swinging open to disclose heaps of wormy skulls. I ran miles after a huge black motor-hearse, which I knew contained her corpse; but when I caught up with it there was nothing inside but a crazy pug-dog, with a ticket on its collar: "Consigned to Governor Charles—a first-class working machine."

At last, after other equally charming adventures, I did find Ronny. She was concealed in a secret chamber under the dome of the Capitol and was hammering furiously on a typewriter. Documents and unanswered correspondence were stacked about her to tottering heights, and beside her stood Governor Charles, brandishing what looked like a Herculean club.

I, however, knew it to be the Power of Veto.

Veronica's cheeks were hollow, and her eyes, as she turned to look at me, enormous. She said: "Hildreth, come soon, as I can never finish all these letters."

Just as I was about to spring upon the Governor and wrest away his Power of Veto, without which I knew him to be helpless, the energy summoned up for the attack awakened me. Ronny's words were still in my ears, as if she had been in the room and spoken them. "Hildreth, come soon, or I can never finish all these letters." The sentence repeated itself over and over in my brain with maddening persistency.

At last, in desperation, I got up, took a hot shower, and dressed. Then, lying down with my clothes on, I slept until nearly eight. In my boyhood, when I suffered much from insomnia, I had learned that trick and it almost invariably worked.

No sooner was I awake, however, than that absurd dream recurred to me.

"The 'Hildreth, come soon' part is all right," I observed to Billings, as he served my coffee and omelet, "but the rest is mere nonsense."

"Yes, sir. Mr. Tolliver called up a while ago—"

"What?" I nearly upset the coffee. "Why didn't you wake me? Confound you, Billings—"

"He said not to disturb you, sir. Only to say that he would be at home until noon, and after that you could reach him at the Sportsmen's."

So, even Rex had deserted me. That was the self-pity of nervousness, of course. Aside from our mutual loss, Tolliver and I had little in common. Ronny was the connecting link between us, and if he fancied other society than mine for a change, it was not astonishing. But that morning I was in a mood to find fault with the whole of creation.

My mind has one peculiar faculty—weakness rather. It will occasionally seize upon some trivial idea or notion and proceed to go over it and over it, to the point of madness. Poe wrote about a fellow with a brain like that. Only he was worse than I. He ended, as I recall it, by fastening his attention on his sweetheart's teeth, and when she died he went out and dug her up and pulled 'em all out. Something like that. Cheerful, pleasant fireside companion, Mr. E. A. Poe. I was never *that* bad, but when I read the story I knew what Poe meant.

In this case it was Freddy Dalton who had started it. His fool joke about the Governor's kidnaping Veronica to make her go on with his work had camped right down in the back of my mind, and there it intended to remain. Hence the dream. What Dalton said, and what I dreamed Veronica said, was repeated to the point of nausea. That there was no possible sense in it made no difference. I couldn't get away from it, and I knew I couldn't.

There was only one cure. I had found that out in previous cases. To be rid of the idea I must translate it into action. Just as the poor dub in the story had to go and pull out those ghastly teeth, so I would have to go to Clinton Charles and ask him

—but no, there reason rebelled. I could *not* ask him if he had my cousin shut up somewhere writing his letters.

Still, I could go to him and—oh, inquire if there were any way in which the search could be officially encouraged by him, as Governor. At the worst, he would only think my brain turned by grief. I was going.

Calling up the executive mansion, I found that Charles was in, but would be leaving in twenty minutes for—I didn't wait to find out where. I hung up in a hurry, and a few minutes later was beating it out Central Avenue in my roadster. Since little Hildreth had to make a fool of himself, let him get it over with as quickly as possible.

By good luck—or bad—I drew up at the curb just in time to see Charles coming down the steps. He had two men with him, important-looking dubs, but my impatience did not propose to be thwarted. Just as well to be snubbed here as anywhere else, I thought. Jumping out, I waited on the sidewalk in front of his own limousine.

As the three came abreast of me I stepped forward, lifting my nice, pretty Panama.

"I beg your pardon, Governor Charles—"

He never even looked at me.

"I'm not giving interviews this morning," he threw me, and went on talking to the man on his right.

"I'm not a reporter," I protested, realizing his mistake. "I want just a moment of your time on a matter of private business."

At that all three turned and glared at me. That is, Charles's companions glared. The Governor never found that necessary. There was something of the magnificent about Charles—something big and overwhelming. As if one should meet one of those giants of old romance, "over twenty cubits high." I don't know how high that is, but I presume it is a great deal more than the five feet nine of Charles's actual stature. No, this largeness was not physical; but every time I had seen him I received the same impression. That he was so much bigger than I that my own insignificance had no right to trouble him.

And yet, with other men, I'm not famed for self-effacement.

"I have no time just at present, Mr.—"

"Wyndham," I finished for him, and got out a card.

"Oh, Wyndham, is it?"

His eyes left my face, and he stood a moment looking down at the card, and tapping it against the fingers of his left hand. One of his companions—a fat, fussy, side-whiskered individual, whom I now recognized as Senator Comstock, a leading member of Charles's own party—stirred impatiently.

"Can't we go on, Governor? Fairchild will—"

To my complete amazement Charles raised his head and cut the Senator's speech short with: "It is not necessary for me to be present, Senator. You are fully acquainted with my views and, I am certain, can convey them with greater eloquence than myself. I find that I shall be detained for a short time, but I may join you somewhat later."

"But—"

"I ask it as a favor, Comstock. I know that you are more than competent to handle this for me."

Charles possessed a voice as remarkable as his personality. It had a vibrant and at the same time velvety quality. He could, when he chose, give it an almost caressing note that was in some queer way personally flattering to the man or men whom he addressed. Flattery is hardly the word, either. It was something nobler than that. But every one who has heard Charles speak from the platform will know what I mean.

The Senator swelled visibly.

"All right, Governor. I'll do my best—but Fairchild will be disappointed."

"Oh, I think not." Then to the other man: "Good day, Mr. Berger. It was kind of you to come to me so frankly."

"Not at all, sir—not at all." Mr. Berger beamed upon the Governor as if he had never hurled verbal tin cans and bad eggs at him from the political stump.

I knew Berger, too. He'd been caricatured often enough. "Rotten politics" stuck out all over him like bristles from a porcupine, and he was the acknowledged

tool of our dear old "railroad ring." I was rather surprised to see him here—that is, I should have been if I had retained any astonishment in stock. Could it be possible that Governor Charles was dismissing these men in order to attend to me?

It was not only possible, but true. As the limousine rolled off, bearing the virtuous Senator and his blackguardly companion, Charles turned to me.

"And now, Mr. Wyndham, if you will come into the house I shall be glad to hear whatever you have to say."

"Thank you. You're very kind."

He led the way, walking a few steps in advance, and I followed meekly behind. Ha! I had it! He had mistaken me for some one else. Some other Wyndham, some important, expected Wyndham, should have been going up that walk at the gubernatorial back. Once inside—my real identity established—well, fireworks were due.

I set my teeth. Before I was thrown out I would ask him one question, if I had to barricade myself behind chairs and tables.

He took me straight to his private study, a large, somber, book-lined room on the first floor. There, having closed the door, he laid his hat, stick, and gloves on a table littered with papers, and faced me, still standing.

"Now, Mr. Wyndham?"

Often when most embarrassed or excited I am outwardly most calm.

"I won't detain you but a few moments," I began in the coolest and most leisurely manner. "I came to see you about my cousin, Miss Veronica Wyndham."

"Yes?"

The word came curt as a knife-stab. Nothing caressing about that. But at least he was not astonished, and therefore could not be receiving me under any false impression.

"Yes," I continued, still very leisurely of speech, and increasingly embarrassed under the surface. "You know, for a while she was your private secretary."

What an asinine thing to say! Of course he knew it. But instead of snapping me up as I expected, Charles half-turned away and indicated a chair by the window.

"Won't you sit down, sir?"

He seated himself in a chair facing me, and pushed a small humidior across the table.

"Smoke?" he asked briefly.

In a sort of daze I took a cigar, he helped himself also, and not another word was said until the two Havanas were cut and lighted. Then he answered me, as if there had been no interruption:

"Yes, as you say, Miss Wyndham was for a time my secretary."

He had a queer way of speaking, I thought. Quite rapid, and yet every word distinct and some way—tense. I had never before noticed it was a mannerism of his.

"She has disappeared," I observed.

"I know it."

"She is—very dear to me."

That was inane—sentimental—oh, for Heaven's sake, why couldn't I ask my question and get away? Those deep-blue, visionary eyes of Charles were fixed on my face. Beneath them the contradictory mouth and chin seemed to grow even firmer and more stern.

"Yes?" Again that cutting monosyllable.

"We are trying to find her," I continued, "and I thought you might be able to help us."

"And why, Mr. Wyndham, should you think that I can help you?"

He leaned across and shook the ash from his cigar into a tray on the table.

Suddenly I gave up. I was making a fool of myself with a vengeance. I rose from my chair so abruptly that Charles started.

"Governor," I said, reaching for my hat, and my absurd embarrassment leaving me in the act of defeat, "I had no right to come here and take up your time. Since my cousin went, I have naturally been under a heavy strain, and everything else having failed, I recalled her connection with you. I thought you might be willing to use your influence toward pushing the inquiry. It was most kind of you to grant me an interview, and I fear you put aside important matters to do it."

"That was nothing—a meeting from which I could easily be spared."

Charles rose, too, and I thought he

looked much less stern. Probably my apology had softened him. Then he actually smiled.

"Miss Wyndham was a very unusual young woman. I can hardly blame you for being grieved over her disappearance. I read of it in the papers at the time. I fear there is little I can do to help, but if an opportunity does arise, be sure I shall take it. Nothing else you wished to ask?"

"Why, one question, if you don't mind."

"Certainly not. What is it?"

"Do you know where she is?"

Yes, I asked it. The question slipped out of ambush and off my tongue before I could check it. What I meant to say was, did he know of anything in connection with her work of that year which could have any bearing on the case. But my subconsciousness tricked me, and loosed the most amazingly insolent query I could have possibly devised.

Charles started again, and like a flash all the geniality left his face. He looked cold as an iceberg, and unapproachable as the Grand Lama of Tibet.

"Mr.—Wyndham!"

I was quenched—obliterated. And my deadly calmness of embarrassment returned.

"It's a question I ask every one," I drawled. "Sort of habit I've acquired during the last week. Good day, Governor—and thanks, ever so much."

"Good day, sir."

I left the room with a dignity which I knew to be awesomely ridiculous—and left him standing there, staring after me. Somebody—or something, I was too flooded with chagrin to know which—showed me to the door. That was the end of my call on Governor Clinton Charles.

All the way down the walk, as I got into my car, started it, and drove on out Central Avenue, I was conscious of nothing but a rising tide of white-hot rage—a most unfamiliar sensation.

Why—why—why? Why should I allow myself to be so overwhelmed by the mere presence of a man that I could not speak to him intelligently? Why did I care in the least what he thought of me, one way or the other? But why, above all other whys,

did I ask that last impertinent, altogether outrageous question?

CHAPTER VI.

MRS. SANDRY READS A LETTER.

REX never came near me that morning, nor did I seek him. I had nothing to tell him, except a humiliating episode which I wouldn't tell to anybody.

The more I thought of it, the less I thought of myself. Clinton Charles, recognizing my name, doubtless, as being the same as his former secretary's, had put off attendance at a meeting in order to grant me an interview. Of course he remembered Ronny, and of course he remembered her kindly. No one could do less.

Then, instead of taking advantage of his courtesy and putting my case to him frankly, I had stumbled and dawdled along, said nothing that I wanted to say, and generally given him an impression of total imbecility. And crowned the effect with an impertinent insult.

What if Charles *were* an important man, of an unusual and dynamic personality? Ronny was just as wonderful, in a different way. Just as important, too, and a darned sight more so, where I was concerned. I had behaved like an awkward schoolboy. Worse, I had lost a possible chance to enlist in the search a man with some real brains and intelligence.

I avoided my friends all morning, but finding my own society intolerable, decided at last to go around to the Aldine and call on Mrs. Sandry. Every day I had sent her flowers, and made telephone inquiries, and I knew that she was sufficiently recovered to see me.

The nurse met me with a professional smile and the information that Mrs. Sandry was out of danger, though still weak. I found her sitting up in bed, a lace boudoir-cap on her snow-white hair, and my last flowers on a table beside her. She welcomed me with tears, and I was so glad to talk with some one (besides Tolliver, of course) who was really afflicted by the same loss as myself, that I found myself enjoying the call.

We talked, and agreed, and discussed possibilities (I had to be hopeful there, for Mrs. Sandry's sake), and eulogized our lost one, quite in the manner of the family when they meet after the funeral. Of course, Mrs. Sandry was not related to Veronica, but if they had been mother and daughter the old lady could have felt no worse over her disappearance.

Finally she pointed at a little desk.

"There's a bundle of letters in there, Hildreth. Letters that she wrote me while I was in the sanatorium last winter. They are so dear. There is one where she speaks of you, Hildreth, and I want to read it to you. Will you bring them over here?"

I was by that time in a condition of maudlin sentimentality where I knew I should weep outright if Ronny had said anything very touching about me—though how she could have done that was a matter for curiosity. However, I went to the desk, selected the bundle referred to, and as I pulled it out of the pigeonhole by the ribbon it was tied with, the ribbon gave way. It had been tightly bound, and its sudden release caused a sort of explosion of letters. Ronny's missives flew right and left, some on the floor, and a couple in Mrs. Sandry's ivory-finish scrap-basket.

I gathered up those on the floor, and reached in the basket after the other two. My hand came up with not only the enveloped letters, but a torn half-sheet of note-paper. There were only a few lines written upon it, and they were in my cousin's upright, firm hand, always clear and legible—so legible, in fact, that my eyes took in the meaning almost without volition.

It was a letter which she had begun, sitting at Mrs. Sandry's desk instead of her own. But instead of finishing it, she had torn the sheet across and cast it aside, doubtless dissatisfied with her opening lines. The detective who, while Mrs. Sandry was too ill to protest, had explored my cousin's private correspondence, had stopped short of raiding Mrs. Sandry's own desk. The nurse probably played dragon at the door. The torn sheet had not been emptied from the basket, because there was practically nothing else in it.

For some obscure reason, as I looked at my cousin's writing, my mind seemed to come to a dead halt—to stop thinking. I knew that those few words were laden with a meaning which was not innocuous; some dreadful import which loomed up like a huge black wave, poised, frozen, held motionless by the momentary numbness of my brain. There was in me a gripping sense of evil—but no thought at all to tell what the evil might be.

"Hildreth!" It was Mrs. Sandry's voice which set my mind going again—and released the black wave. "Is there anything the matter? Are you ill? What have you there in your hand?"

"Nothing—or rather, your letters. Won't you read them to me?"

I walked over to the bed, laid the letters on the coverlet beside her, and myself sat down in a chair. The little table with my flowers was between us.

She searched among the letters for a moment, drew one out, and began to read. What it was about, I have not the slightest idea. My eyes were fixed on that torn sheet of note-paper held on my knee, and concealed from Mrs. Sandry by the table.

While the old lady read, and I sat there very quietly, the black wave was flying over me—choking—strangling.

Said the bit of paper on my knee:

MY DEAR CLINTON:

Your description of Asgard Heights was charming, but in the spirit of your letter I prefer to think that you wrong both yourself and me. Should I do as you have asked for such an incentive, surely we should have little regard for one another after the first glamour had worn off. I tell you frankly—as I have always been frank with you—that the very least of your personal arguments carries more weight than all the splendors and luxuries you could devise to tempt me. You must understand—

There it ended. "You must understand—" and there it broke off, was torn across, and cast aside. I did understand—understood with an ever-increasing and abominable lucidity; understood beyond the reach of blessed and merciful doubt.

"My dear Clinton," and "Asgard Heights." There, in my hand, I held the key to the whole mystery of the disappear-

ance of Veronica Wyndham. And I would have given anything—my life gladly—to hurl that key back into oblivion.

Asgard Heights. That was the famous estate in the mountains which Charles had purchased within the last few months. Until that time he had never been wealthy in any large sense—merely prosperous. Then an uncle of his died, and in pride for his nephew's successes and great aims left him nearly the whole of a reputedly enormous fortune. When Charles's first act after receiving this inheritance was the purchase of Asgard Heights, his supporters shook their heads and his enemies rejoiced.

Here at last was a handle, a dangling rope, by which Charles could be pulled down from his popular pinnacle. No man, they said, could own Asgard Heights, with its vast palace of a house, its wonderful gardens, and its square miles of fenced-in game preserves, and go on playing the game of People *vs.* Plutocracy—at least, not on the people's side.

When it became known that not a single American citizen was employed by Charles on the large staff of servants required by the scale of house and grounds, his opponents pounced on that also and exploited it with vicious joy. They ignored the fact that in our State Chinese servants are a commonplace in many households.

The Governor, moreover, though a native of Marshall City, was the son of a missionary. He had spent most of his boyhood in China, spoke two or three dialects, and was known to have played patron saint to more than one strayed Celestial in our midst, fallen into difficulties born of the white man's prejudice against the yellow. He had reason, then, to look among them for loyalty and service, though perhaps I alone now knew the reason behind the reason for this choice.

He ran not one-tenth the risk of gossip-spreading from his probably well-bribed Chinamen that he would have run from servants of any other nationality.

Despite the strenuous efforts of his detractors, what actual effect the Heights would have on his career remained to be seen. I had heard it said that Charles was an exception to the common rule; that he

held the people's attention, fascinated them, by his sheer brilliancy and magnetism; that he was not a common man raised by his fellows to be their representative, but a master who commanded and was obeyed by all.

That, of course, was gross exaggeration. But, at least as yet, his popularity throughout the State seemed unaffected.

So, "dear Clinton" had described Asgard Heights charmingly to my cousin? Now, a great many people call me Hildreth or Hil. But who called Governor Charles by his given name? His most intimate friend, perhaps—if he possessed one—and, it seemed, his former secretary. That she should call him so was to me almost evidence enough in itself. Why, he hadn't even a nickname among his enemies or friends. He was Governor Charles—Clinton Charles—damnable, hypocritical, woman-betraying Charles, as I named him now.

I recalled the man as I had seen him that afternoon, with his beautiful eyes, and his fine, strong face and noble forehead. Recalled the charm of his voice, and the enchanting flattery of his manner—when he chose it to be flattering. Recalled the magnetism of his personality, attractive or repellent, as he wished to make it; his amazing abilities, and his immense capacity for concentrated work.

There was the very picture of the man whom I, before Rex stepped in, had prophesied that Veronica would marry.

Yet she had never dropped a hint, even to me, that Charles had offered her any personal attentions. His name and hers had never been connected in that way. Certainly he had never paid her open courtship.

No—open—courtship! But secret, secret—"My dear Clinton—" "Asgard Heights," "Should I do as you have asked for such incentive—" "The very least of your personal arguments carries more weight—" The words of a woman prepared to yield, but striving still to hold about herself some few rags of self-respect. No, I wronged her there. If Ronny had sold herself, it had been for love, and no more ignoble inducement.

But that she—my cousin—my little *chum*—a Wyndham—

No wonder that, when he heard my name, saw my card, he dismissed his companions, and led me into his house. No wonder he eyed me with the stern expectancy of a man who faces a cocked and leveled pistol. And no wonder he was courteous, and at the same time strained of voice and manner.

He thought that I knew! And when I asked him outright, "Do you know where she is?" his indignant "Mr.—Wyndham!" was no more than the final bluff of a man who is at the point of throwing down his hand.

And I had walked out of there—left him—never pressed the question. But, thank God, there was time enough yet for that.

Carefully folding that scrap of Veronica's writing, I put it in my pocket and rose. I realized that all this time Mrs. Sandry's voice had been sounding in my unconscious ears, and that now it had stopped.

"It was very good of you to read it, mother," I said, "and now I've tired you enough. Good-by."

And, to what must have been her acute amazement, I bent over and kissed her.

"Why, Hildreth!" she exclaimed, and began crying again.

You see, I wanted to bid an affectionate farewell to somebody who loved Ronny and liked me, because I intended to go out and kill Governor Charles.

CHAPTER VII.

A CHANGE OF HEART.

I AM just a common, ordinary, quite indolent and usually optimistic sort of a club. Certainly cut on the lines of neither an assassin nor a hero. High tragedy and little Hildreth have never been team-mates. At least they never had until intuition, deduction, and general information made me aware that the Veronica I knew, the beloved, comradely Ronny, bound to me by ties not only of consanguinity but the most sympathetic understanding—that this girl had indeed gone from me forever.

2 A-S

That the person who had destroyed her, more surely than by murder, was the man who, above all others, should have held himself straight, firm, true, as his face would have me believe him, even without his puritanical reputation.

And why shouldn't he have married her? Was a Charles so much better than a Wyndham? Snobbishness is a quality I despise, but a man has a right to defend his name when another man casts mud at it, even by inference.

Had Charles been a married man, this thing would have been equally atrocious, unworthy, but at least understandable. But he was not. Somehow, despite his matrimonial desirability, he had reached the Governorship and the age of thirty-five and remained a bachelor. Every one knew that he had no interest in women, though (or perhaps because of it) he was as popular among the feminine voters as among the men.

Oh, no, he had no interest in women! How many others beside Veronica had yielded to that magnetic charm of his, thrown away their happiness, and kept it secret for love of him—to save his accursed reputation?

I had left the Aldine Apartments, and next thing found myself walking into my own rooms, though how I reached there I had no idea. Billings met me, took one look at my face, and the next instant was beside me.

"Lean on me, sir. I'll get you into bed. You're all right, sir. I'll have Dr. Meadows here in—"

I flung his arm off angrily.

"What's the matter with you, Billings? I don't want any doctor."

He hovered around me with the anxiety of an old hen over its solitary, sick-looking offspring.

"I beg pardon, sir. You're white as a ghost and look worse than when you was coming down with typhoid. It's all this strain and worry, sir, and you ought to take care of yourself—you ought, really. If the poor young lady should come home to-day and find you looking so—"

"Never mind the poor young lady, Bill. And don't worry about me. I'm going out

again in a few minutes, and if Tolliver calls up—”

I stopped right there. Until that moment I had forgotten all about Rex Tolliver. Should I tell him? If I did, vengeance would be taken out of my hands. I could be sure of that. During the past week the cheerful, somewhat opinionated, but always fun-loving boy who had won Veronica had changed into a sullen, grief-ridden man, irritable, ready to fly into anger at a word or look. I could imagine the red rage into which this news would throw him; and what form would that anger take?

I had thought to force Charles privately into admission of the truth, then kill him, and take the consequences. No need for the world to know any reason. Let them think what they liked. But Tolliver—how well did I know him? Would not his hatred turn upon both betrayer and betrayed?

To Clinton Charles mere exposure would be a worse punishment than death. In our State such an intrigue would not be tolerated for an instant. Charles was taking a terrific risk for the sake of his selfish pleasure; yet no one could doubt that to him ambition was more than life.

Would Tolliver's vengeance take *that* form?

And thinking of it put a new aspect on my own determination. Was this my boasted loyalty to Veronica? She loved the man, loved him so that, yielding at last to his entreaties, she had been willing to forget honor, friendship, all that had made up her life till then, and go to him in shame and secrecy. And for the satisfaction of my own anger, she was to be cut off from any possible return to the respect of her world and, more important still, herself.

I was ashamed. What worth is a protector who protects by unreasoning violence? I would go to Charles, but instead of assassinating him out of hand, he should have a chance to make such reparation as still lay in his power. Veronica must go away for a time. We would fix up some sort of plausible story to account for her original disappearance. What it would be I could not conceive, but hard-driven invention will work miracles. Then she must openly return, break off her engagement

with poor Rex Tolliver, and openly receive the attentions of our honorable Governor. The bitter comedy should end with their marriage.

I no longer stood the least in awe of Charles. It had been fear, not contempt for my insignificance, which had enveloped him in an atmosphere of strain and caused my own unreasonable embarrassment.

And yet, to make my weapons invincible, did I not need evidence a trifle more complete than the scrap of letter in my pocket? I knew, and he would know that I knew. But he might barricade himself behind his great and virtuous reputation, have my cousin spirited away, close the mouths of the Oriental servants with the wealth he now possessed in such plenitude, and laugh at me for a suspicious, presumptuous fool.

The simplicity of my original intention had its virtues. His denial would be small good to me if he died next moment; this other plan involved complications, difficulties.

I had driven poor, worried Billings from my sitting-room while I thought the problem out. Now I called him back.

“Bill, I'm going out. It's four now, and I may not be back till late this evening. If Mr. Tolliver phones or comes here, tell him there's nothing new. That I'll see him in the morning—or to-night, if he cares to wait.”

I was going to have my hands full with Rex Tolliver. I pitied him from the bottom of my heart, but Veronica's happiness came first. If I could possibly prevent it, Rex was never going to guess the shameful truth.

Half an hour later I was speeding out the Charlevoix Pike, headed for that charming mountain retreat from the cares of office, Asgard Heights.

CHAPTER VIII.

AN UNEXPECTED COMPLICATION.

MARSHALL CITY, as you may know, lies on two sides of the Hawkeye River and in the center of a wide valley, around which sweeps the curving Père Marius Range. The iron and copper

district is somewhat to the southeast, and Charlevoix Pike runs westward, ascends Kennett Mountain, and on to Charlevoix beyond the range. It is a hard, broad, well-oiled road, a great favorite with motorists, and that day there were plenty of cars out besides mine.

The afternoon was sunny, but not too warm, and as more than one acquaintance gave me a passing hail, I was sick with memory of the many times that my little roadster had carried Ronny out this way.

Three miles from Kennett I turned off the pike into the branching road which led to Governor Charles's splendid and isolated domain. Since he bought it he had never entertained there.

I knew why now.

Ronny would have plenty of time to be alone with her reflections, for Charles doubtless deigned to visit her only at such odd hours as he could conveniently spare from his political occupations.

I ground my teeth. Yes, I did. Exactly like the regular villain. Indifferent, was he? Charles, the magnificent, with the world and my cousin at his feet! Well, just wait a little—till I had seen her, talked with her, had the evidence of my own eyes to support my story. Then we should have the spectacle of Mr. Clinton Charles on his knees to little Hildreth, begging for a chance to bestow all public honor upon the neglected resident of Asgard Heights.

A picture of him in that attitude came to me, with myself, arms folded in masterful scorn. There was an incongruity about it which brought an unwilling grin to my lips. Nevertheless, something pretty near that was going to happen, or the State would find itself minus one perfectly good Governor.

Just as I reached this interesting stage in my reflections, a loud bang, followed by a whistling sound, brief but ghastly, apprized me that my left rear tire had given up its ghost.

I stopped the car. For a moment haste tempted me to run her off the road, leave her, and walk the remaining distance. Common sense, however, reluctantly assured me that thus I should arrive much later than if I stopped and adjusted the spare tire. I

was yet nearly four miles from my destination. Moreover, to arrive on foot, dusty and warm, would give me an appearance which scarcely fitted with my purpose.

So I descended, got out my spare tire—and discovered that the jack was missing. I recalled then having loaned it to a fellow motorist on the road, who had broken his, and who had promised to return it "in a couple of hours, old fellow, when I pass your place on my way back." He might have turned it in at the garage, but it was certainly not in my car.

I glanced back along the road, and was somewhat dismayed to see another motor approaching. It was still about a quarter-mile distant. This road led nowhere but to Asgard Heights. If that were Charles coming, the situation might develop with more speed than I had anticipated. But every one knew the Governor's brown touring-car; this car was bright-red, and I at once determined to hail it and borrow a jack.

It was traveling at considerable speed, but I stepped in the middle of the road and waved my arms. He had to stop or run me over.

He stopped.

"Hello, Tolliver!" I said. "You're just in time to lend me a hand. Tire's busted."

Yes, indeed it was Rex. I'd a good deal rather it had been Charles, or Lucifer, or some one else whom I wouldn't have minded meeting just then. But we have to take what is handed us in this world, and so I had to take Rex Tolliver. Of course, my visit to the Heights was off.

"Out for a spin?"

Tolliver sprang to the ground and came toward me. I thought the amiability of his tone excessive. Since last Thursday amiability and Rex had been perfect strangers.

"I was," said I off-handedly. "Will be again, perhaps, if you'll lend me your jack. Howard Trumbull has mine. Why a man who will spend three thousand dollars for a car should carry a cast-iron jack beats me. However, he's got my good steel one now."

"You don't say so! So your tire blew out, eh?"

"You can see it," I retorted impatiently.

"Come, hurry up with that jack, won't you?"

"Sure—in a minute. Say, Wyndham, why are you going to call on Governor Charles?"

"Governor Charles!" I repeated it as if I had never before heard the name. It was bad acting, but he took me by surprise.

"Ye-es. Or didn't you know this road leads to Asgard Heights?"

"Of course I knew it. But you needn't infer that little Hildreth is going to call on the Governor. In the first place, he hasn't been invited, and in the second—"

"In the second, having seen him once before to-day, why should you bother to come 'way out here this afternoon?"

That made me angry. My own amiability had been worn pretty thin by recent events, and besides, Rex's tone was insufferable.

"What do you mean, Tolliver? Have you been spying on me?"

"I've been trailing you around a bit."

He pushed up his goggles, and I saw that he was watching me keenly, eyes half-shut, suspicion in every line of his tanned, handsome face. My irritation vanished in alarm. If Tolliver had learned anything to make him suspect Charles, then that morning call of mine, together with my presence on the Heights road, was plenty to start something which I might have hard work to stop.

"That's a little bit beneath you," I said with an air of dignified reproof. "I hardly thought you'd do a thing like that."

"No? Well, I don't mind telling you, Wyndham, that I've known all along you had something up your sleeve that you were precious careful to keep me out of. You shut me up mighty indignantly, didn't you, when I suggested—"

I broke in on him sharply.

"Don't say it! I won't pretend that I don't know what you mean. I'm not likely to forget that the man who is supposed to be the most jealous guardian of my cousin's honor insulted her by the basest sort of insinuation. Believe me, Tolliver, I haven't forgotten it at all."

That took him aback. My heart was sick in me, and there was no real spirit be-

hind the words, but he thought differently. He flushed, and looked from my face to the yard of dusty white road between us.

"I'm not—altogether responsible, I think." Then his eyes flashed up and met mine again. "But why are you going to Asgard Heights? And why did you call on Charles this morning? Good Lord, Hil, if you knew all I've suffered, you'd not blame me for suspecting things. Be frank with me. All those months she was working for him—alone with him half the time. Carpenter had no right to send her there, nor Charles to take her. He's not married. No other women in the house but servants. Wyndham, if I'm wrong, kill me for a jealous fool. If I'm right—for God's sake, tell me!"

Nice position for Hildreth, yes. Said Hildreth pulls himself together and remembers that, not being of the G. W. family, he can artistically lie.

"My friend, if you were any one but the man whom my cousin has seen fit to choose for her prospective husband, I'd take you at your word—or try to. But you are Veronica's choice—and besides, I haven't a pistol handy.

"Now I'll tell you something that I had meant to keep from you until I had proved whether there was any truth in it. Thought you had had enough of false hopes and bad clues. Really, though, you've hardly proved worthy of so much consideration."

"What d'you mean? Don't stop like that! If you've run across something that may lead to Ronny, tell it to me. I'm a dog—a beast—anything you like. But tell me!"

I wanted to tell him, all right, but for a minute my inventive powers failed. At last, in desperation, I pitched on the "political secret" idea which I had suggested to Chief Brennan, and had meant to ask Charles about—before I learned the truth. Only I turned it inside out, and hoped that to Rex's keyed-up imagination its extravagance might sound plausible.

"Well, I called on Charles this morning."

"Yes, I saw you."

"You said that before. I called there because I had a notion that in Ronny's work with him she might have been given

some information which could be used by the Governor's enemies. I wanted to ask him straight out if that were so."

I stopped again. Drama—also invention—is helped by artistic pauses.

"Yes? And he said it was possible?"

I might have assented, but that would not have accounted to him for my presence near Asgard Heights.

"He didn't admit it, but some of the things he said aroused my suspicions in another direction. Rex, I shouldn't be at all surprised if she is being held at the Heights to keep her from telling something she knows about Charles—something which would ruin him politically. I came to find out that, and if you'll kindly go back to Marshall City I'll finish the job. No, my dear fellow, one can do it better than two. I'm going up there and say that Governor Charles has sent me out with a message for Miss Wyndham. The very fact that I know she's there will gain me admittance—if she is there. Once her presence is proved, it will be easy enough to get her away, and—"

"Yes, it will!" Tolliver viewed me with gloomy contempt. "First thing they'll do will be to telephone the Governor and ask him if he's sent out a messenger."

That was true enough. But anyway, Tolliver had swallowed my bait—or appeared to.

"I never thought of that," I confessed with a melancholy air. "Then the best thing we can do is to go back to town. I'll have another interview with Charles—"

"You mean *I* will!" Rex's hazel eyes flared with a sudden reddish tinge.

"No, you won't." What with excitement and the strain of impromptu falsehood, my coolness was by this time ice-bergian. "That is my privilege as her relative, and besides you'd simply go in there, get in a tearing rage, and spoil everything. Let me handle this, Rex. For Ronny's sake!"

It seemed he was going to yield. That "for Ronny's sake" was a nice touch of sentiment—and applicable enough, in all truth. He hesitated, and I thought to clinch his decision by saying: "This is a case for diplomacy, not brute force. The police would laugh at us if we went to them, and

if *you* see Charles in your present mood, it will end by her being removed to another hiding place. She's already been somebody's prisoner for a week. You don't want to risk lengthening the time, do you?"

That clinched his decision, all right, but at an unexpected angle. He took one stride forward and grabbed my shoulder.

"Hil, if she's at Asgard Heights, why in the name of sense should we wait to go through all that 'diplomatic' rigmarole? She's your cousin and my promised wife. Aren't we men enough to go up there, find out the truth and take her away—by force, if necessary?"

Yes, we probably were—if she were being held by force. Even at that moment my opinion of Rex's mentality dropped ten degrees below normal. He really believed my story—thought that Governor Clinton Charles had violently kidnaped his former secretary to prevent her revealing some dark secret of the Reform Party. However, the main consideration was not Rex's credulity, but to get him away from this vicinity.

"I think you're wrong, Tolliver. We can't do anything now, just the two of us. The whole estate is fenced in with deer wire—and probably patrolled by his Chinese servants. And they'd never let us in at the gate."

Again he eyed me steadily and long. I saw by the look in his face that an idea was about to spring into brilliant being, and braced myself to squelch it if I could.

"We may not be able to enter by the gate," he said slowly, "nor over the fence. But what if I should tell you that I know a way to get in those grounds without meeting any such obstacles?"

"Airplane?" I suggested intelligently.

"Airplane! No. You and I can go in there, Hil, and no one be any the wiser, unless we choose. Here! The first thing is to get your tire fixed."

He was back at his own car as he spoke, and opening the tool-chest.

"But, Tolliver—" I stopped. What "but" could I advance?

What his plan was I could not imagine. Something wild, no doubt, that would end in our arrest for trespass, and in no glimpse

of Ronny. On the other hand, Fate might not be half so kind. If he did get in—found my cousin, perhaps in the very company of her lover—heard from her own lips that she was there by choice—He mustn't go—he *must—not!*

"Man," I said, "don't be a fool. Whatever your scheme is, it's sure to end disastrously for all of us. Come back to Marshall City and let me talk to the Governor."

By that time he had the jack in position and was working the old tire off the rim. He glanced up with a flash of renewed suspicion.

"It seems to me, Wyndham, that you're darned anxious to keep me away from Asgard Heights. What's the idea?"

"No more than I said. Oh, well, if you want to take the risk, go ahead. Perhaps, after all, it's the best way."

For now I realized that my unlucky "inspiration" had landed me where further protest would only confirm Tolliver in his original suspicion. All I could hope was that Charles's Chinamen were alert, intelligent watch-dogs—or, if we did find Ronny, that I could get a word with her ahead of her desperate *fiancé*.

CHAPTER IX.

"JACOB'S LADDER."

IT was then after six o'clock and, as Tolliver cheerfully remarked, by the time we were within the boundaries of Asgard Heights darkness would lend its concealment to our visit. I thought it also increased the chance of Charles's presence there, which would lessen my opportunity for a solitary talk with my cousin in advance of Tolliver by about ninety per cent. I could hardly advance that as a reason for delay, but I did ask to be informed immediately of the mysterious means by which we were to enter undetected.

"Never you mind, Hil. I've something to show you which will make you sit up. I don't believe Governor Charles knows there's a back door to his new estate—of course, if he does know and has had it blocked up, then the game's off—or rather,

it can't be played on the same lines. No, I won't stop to explain here. Take too long. Climb in your little go-cart now, and follow Uncle Rex."

The prospect of immediate action had produced a remarkable change in Tolliver. His old boyish spirit had returned, and if to me his cheerful impetuosity appeared like the enthusiasm of a maniac, rushing headlong over a cliff, that was because I knew the cliff was there and he did not. And the worst of it was that the least word of warning would only precipitate disaster.

Seeing no way out of it, I followed the dust of Rex's touring car, one minute cursing him for a credulous fool to believe so wild a yarn as I had told him, the next praying that his credulity might not give way again to his original and, as Ronny's letter informed me, correct suspicions.

He did not, as I had expected, drive on along the road to Asgard Heights, but started back toward the pike. In a short time we had joined the scattered procession returning cityward. For the life of me I could not reconcile this with his avowed intention to make his investigation that very evening.

A short distance beyond Salvator's, a road-house at whose pleasant open-air tables I had often dined with my cousin, Rex turned aside. Turning after him I found myself invading what might have been considered a road by a pre-Columbian-American of unexact requirements, but he would have deceived himself. It was not so much a road as a series of hummocks traversed by ravinelike ruts. The natural forest began here, which spread out toward the pike from a spur of Kildaire Mountain, and this road-thing struck inward and upward between the trees.

Tolliver's car is like a traction engine, or one of these armored "caterpillars" that they use in trench warfare. It might refuse to climb a vertical stone wall, unless the stones were rough enough to give tire-grip, and then it would probably go right along up. But my roadster is more delicate and ladylike. At the end of the first forty yards she plunged her left fore wheel in a rut she thought was a bottomless crevasse, gave one panic-stricken sob, and quit. Rex

came back on foot, in response to the yell I sent after him.

"If this car walked on stilts," I said, "she might be able to toddle along here. As it is, she's done. Is it necessary that we invade the wilderness?"

"Of course," he retorted impatiently. "If you would only drive a real motor instead of that wretched— Say, I can't tow you. The grade is too steep, and it's too rough. You'll have to ride with me."

"And leave my car here? She'll be stolen. Come on back to town, Tolliver, and let's go at this thing from a sensible angle—"

"Any man who would steal *that* would deserve—deserve to own her. However, if you care more for your car than you do for your cousin, go back by all means. I can get on alone, I imagine."

I imagined, too. I imagined Tolliver coming upon Ronny and Cl—

"I'll go with you. Give me a hand, though, and we'll put her in the underbrush."

We did, and covered her over with boughs, like a forlorn, deserted babe in the wood. Rex begrudged the time spent, but worse than futile though I knew delay to be, I could not resist holding back as much as possible the hour of our debut at Asgard Heights.

Once in Rex's juggernaut machine, however, matters were out of my hands. We went. I spent most of the time in the air, as we negotiated the slight inequalities of the way—in other words, bumped the bumps—for Rex drove as if he thought he were on the Harlequin track, which is the pride of Marshall City's racing-car owners.

Dusk was laying its gray soft veil across the summer world. Naturally, it got laid first in the forest. Rex lighted his lamps, and by their spreading, rut-exaggerating radiance, we penetrated where foot of man may have trod before, but not the tire of an automobile—I'm sure of that. At last, when I was certain that in ten more cataclysms the inside of that car would drop out and give the "road" its hard-won victory, Rex jumped a ditch—I thought he did, though there may have been a plank or so over it—and we came to a halt.

The lamps showed a rocky, treeless slant directly ahead, ascending at an angle of eighty-five degrees.

"Why don't you go on up?" I inquired. "Run out of gasoline?"

My friend disdained to reply. He sprang out, took off his dust-coat and goggles, bundled them under the seat, and began searching for something in the car.

"Now, where's that torch gone?" he demanded. "Oh, by George!"

The hunt stopped and he straightened up. "Trumbull has it. He borrowed it one night last week."

"Wanted it to look at my jack with, maybe. Now we know why friend Trumbull can afford a three-thousand-dollar car. What did you need it for? Torch-light procession?"

"Never mind. Come along," was his sole reply.

I meekly obeyed, as he started off through the underbrush at right angles to the rocky slant which had, apparently, ended our connection with the automobile.

"Don't you think the mystery could be decently canned now?" I pleaded, as I caught up with him. "I'd like to know what we're doing."

"Going up Jacob's ladder."

"I believe you *are* crazy."

"Thanks. I call the place Jacob's ladder because only an angel could use it conveniently. An angel or a small boy."

As he spoke, Rex ducked and plunged beneath a dark mass which, on following, I identified as the low-spreading boughs of a balsam pine.

Emerging into yet blacker shadow, a match flared in Rex's hand. We seemed to be standing at the bottom of a narrow fissure in the rock. Above the walls drew together, ending far up in a threadlike slit of stars. There were loose pebbles underfoot. Some time a stream had flowed here from out the stony heart of Kildaire Mountain.

"What do you think of the Asgard Heights back hallway?" my friend inquired.

"You'll have to show me. Name the big idea."

And at last Rex condescended to explain. Years ago, it seemed, his people had owned

a summer cottage located some two miles distant. Julys and Augusts Rex used to play happy barefoot kid, and in that capacity he joined a band of desperate brigands (heirs of several neighboring cottagers), to whose captaincy he won by discovery of this very rift in the Heights stronghold.

"I don't believe old Mason ever had an idea where some of his best fruit went to." (Mason was the "iron and copper king" from the heirs of whose estate Charles had acquired the Heights.) "Brigands, you know, are bound to be unscrupulous. He trusted his fencing, but there's a sort of plateau above here and my Jacob's ladder leads up inside the fence. It's not conspicuous at the top, and that good old balsam hides all the lower part. If our mothers had ever guessed the broken necks we risked and the forbidden fruit we got away with, they'd have seen visions of undertakers' wagons or criminal futures for us all right. Gee! We were some desperate bandits!"

I was feeling very sorry for Rex just then. Blindly, almost joyously, he was approaching that before which this folly of secret stairways and stolen apples would be scorched and shriveled to nothing. He evidently proposed to rescue his promised bride after the best style of any serial "movie." How would he face the sordid truth of his betrayal?

If Rex observed in me any lack of response to his own enthusiasm, he made no comment, but turned and led the way yet further into the yawning depths.

Stumbling after, I wondered if I had cold-blooded nerve enough to pitch him off the top of this mysterious "stair" once we were up it. Some such drastic method was needed, it seemed, if I wished to prevent a greater disaster.

But the actual sight of Jacob's ladder, as he had named it, jarred me out of my murderous meditations and recalled to me that I had a neck of my own to break.

The crevice had narrowed sharply, till further progress along the stream bed became difficult. Suddenly I collided with Rex, who had come to another halt.

"Where do we go up?" I inquired.

"Right here."

By the light of another match, I saw that he had seated himself on a projection of the rock and was calmly unlacing his shoes. He stopped to wave an airy gesture toward the converging walls above.

I craned my neck and groaned.

"Jacob's ladder is right. We'd be merry little angels before we ever finished that stunt. You're dreaming, man. Come home."

"Did you expect an elevator?" His tones were injured. "Stay here if you're afraid."

He fastened his shoes together by the laces and slung them round his neck. Then with a straight upward spring he caught at a jutting ledge, found invisible foothold for his stockinged toes, half turned and a moment later was braced diagonally across the chasm just above my head.

"So-long," he called tauntingly. "I'll tell Ronny how anxious you were for her." Which reminded me.

In a moment Rex was again on his upward way, yielding me room to follow. He shouted down a few words of encouragement and approval, but he needn't have bothered. So long as I had breath in me, I had simply got to stay in the rescue business. It wasn't Charles, though, from whom I expected to save Ronny once we found her.

The ascent proved slightly less difficult than I had expected. After the first the walls were a fairly uniform three feet odd apart. It was rather like going up the inside of a black chimney, where innumerable ledges and projections made foot and handhold possible. In my troubled state of mind I had neglected to remove my shoes, and in consequence slipped more times than was pleasant. But though my muscles may have been softer than Rex's, my weight was considerably less. When he achieved the final edge, I was not far behind.

Climbing by touch is not a method I should recommend to any other amateur mountaineer, but at last Rex caught my wrists and I realized that even Jacob's ladder had an ultimate top rung.

The narrow crack through which we had emerged was closely bordered by under-

brush; prickly, brambly underbrush, as I discovered when we began to push our way through it. As Rex had said, there was a sort of plateau here on the mountain slope, along whose outer edge ran the high deer-wire fence whose winding miles of length surrounded the entire estate. Far down and to the northeast Marshall City glowed against the sky. Ahead there was only the darkness of trees rising against a starry heaven.

"Come along," urged Rex in a low voice. "Don't make any noise. We might run into a gamekeeper."

I hoped we should. A gamekeeper or a grizzly bear or any other formidable being who might check our progress Veronica-ward.

"No one," Rex continued, "shall stop us now. Are you armed, Hil?"

"Lord, no! I didn't leave home with any idea of playing bandit."

"Well, I am," he said with satisfaction. "There are ten good little persuaders in the clip of this automatic."

"Oh, Lord!" I said again, and then—I think—I groaned.

CHAPTER X.

THE STOLEN LADY—A MELODRAMA.

IT took us over an hour to traverse the distance between our point of entry and the formal park immediately surrounding the residence.

I'm no socialist, but I don't think any man has a right to own nearly two entire mountains. If he does, he should be forced to landscape-garden the whole thing and make the going a little pleasanter for trespassers. I fell down gullies, was detestably scratched by briars, and became convinced a number of times that we were hopelessly lost.

Since breakfast I had been living on anxiety and nervous excitement; good stimulants but poor nourishment. An empty stomach added its plaint to my physical discomforts. By the time we caught a gleam from the first ground-lamp, I was hating Charles and Tolliver so impartially that it would have been a real pleasure to

see them meet—provided my cousin could have been left out of the consequences.

Having crossed the valley between Kil-daire and Kennett, and negotiated a breath-taking slope on the other side, the aforesaid first lamp welcomed us. Tolliver, who had been cursing and grunting along, suddenly assumed the manner of a noble red-skin sleuthing it round the teepees of his hated foe.

I had no objection to dropping full length in the underbrush. In a few more minutes I should have dropped anyway, for I was all in. But on his announcing that in that attitude we would snakily writhe the balance of our way, I rebelled.

"Tolliver," I said, "chloroform the boy-hood reminiscences and recall that you're over ten years old. You're not going to rob an orchard. You're going to be shot for a burglar. You're an adult, little though one would suspect it. Let us flit from tree-trunk to tree-trunk like sinister shadows, if we must, but this slinky sliding idea of yours doesn't appeal to little Hildreth. I'm no snake—not even a caterpillar."

I think his reply hinted a third alternative—a worm, in fact—but I carefully missed its personal application. In the end he rather sulkily yielded, and it was on our pedal extremities that we proceeded toward where he said the house was.

In the natural forest we had met neither man nor beast, and it seemed as if the more ornamental part of the estate were equally deserted. I was too occupied by my thoughts to appreciate the beauty of those famous grounds. Electric lamps were frequent among the trees and along the graveled walks, but glimpses of level pools agleam with lotus blooms, of blossoming bowers, of fantastically clipped yews and flower-starred vistas bordered by trees like slim green guardian damsels, left me unenthusiastic. In fact, I quote that description from a tourist's guide-book, written when the place was Mason's and occasionally on exhibition. Trees like slim green damsels must be worth looking at, too. To diverge back to my story, we tramped unmolested through about a mile of aforesaid scenic triumphs, and then Rex began to get cautious again.

"We're close to the house," he said. "You'd better stay here, Hil, while I go on and reconnoiter."

"As a reconnoiterer, I'm it," I countered. "You stay here, give me that automatic and let me go ahead. I'm slimmer than you and can hide behind anything from a lath to a beech-tree."

"Not on your life! I'd look nice hanging behind while you rushed to the rescue of my promised wife."

"Your promised wife, but my cousin and chum since birth. Don't be so conceited, Rex. She'd welcome a rescue from me just as gladly as from you."

I thought it probable she would, too. Her dismay at seeing either of us was likely to be considerable.

"All right," growled Rex. "Then we'll go on together, but for Heaven's sake drop that careless air of owning the place you've been striding along with. Remember that we can't afford to be caught. If Veronica has really been brought here and forcibly detained, they'll stop at nothing to prevent discovery."

By "they" I presumed he meant those desperadoes of the Reform Party who had committed the supposed crime. Torn between pity for his mentality and dread of impending revelations, I followed on. In my own mind, however, I had determined that Rex was going to lose his little pal soon after we came in sight of the house, which was still concealed by trees. I should slip away from him, go straight to the door and demand to see my cousin. Beyond that foresight halted, but at any cost Veronica, and Charles, if he were here to-night, must be warned.

We were sneaking along in the shelter of some shrubbery that bordered a broad drive, when with a roar and whir a large car shot past us. Rex had grabbed my arm and pulled me flat on the turf.

"Did you see him—did you see him?" he whispered excitedly in my ear. "That was Charles himself in the tonneau."

"Of course it was," I responded with bitter calm. "He'd naturally come home to welcome us. Rex, can't we choose another night when Charles isn't around—"

"I never thought you were such a—

baby, Hil." He had started to use an unkind term than baby. Well, if I seemed a coward to him, he seemed a fool to me, so matters were equal.

"Duck!" I whispered sharply. Rex had risen again to his feet, and my ears had caught a slight clinking and rustling sound some distance to the left of us away from the drive. He heard it, too. We crouched very still on the dew-wet turf, peering into the darkness of a group of small fir trees on the lawn.

Then a yellow glow silhouetted their Jap-anesque trunks and boughs. Beneath, peering straight at us, it seemed, we saw a hideous saffron face. It was not five yards distant, and every detail of the features was clear as some grotesque painting—the slanted, slitlike eyes, wide grinning mouth and yellow, hollow cheeks.

We both gasped, caught by the same eery feeling of spectral horror.

The face turned away, and we caught a glimpse of a shining black coiled queue above a dull blue smock. There was a sound of shuffling, retreating footfalls.

"Hmph!" sniffed my companion. "Keep your nerve, Hil. That was only one of Charles's servants lighting up the gardens."

"Is there a lawn fête coming off? Most of the place is bright as daylight already."

"It makes no difference," said Rex impatiently. "It's the inside of the house that interests us. I think now that the best plan will be for us to conceal ourselves until later in the night, when things quiet down. I know the very place."

He was off again and I after him. I couldn't afford to lose him till I knew the whereabouts of this newly proposed ambushade, so that I could locate him again—after my mission of warning should be accomplished.

We crossed one green alley of trees, at the end of which loomed a majestic portico, a side entrance to the house, I judged. Its imposing size gave one a chill hint of power and grandeur, but the main body of the mansion was merely indicated to our eyes by the gleam of lighted windows through foliage.

Rex approached no nearer. Turning to

the left he led me down a steep terrace, round a laurel hedge, and so to the level of a sunken garden that might have been the pleasure of a wealthy mandarin, rather than a supposedly democratic American.

In the midst was a pool nearly big enough to be called a lake, with a fair-sized island in the center. A steeply curving bridge led across the lotus-starred waters to the door of a scarlet pagoda, whose curved, overlapping roofs, scalloped and fringed with tiny bells, answered the winds' soft breath with a faint and elfin music. (See guide-book aforesaid.) The faint and elfin music didn't attract our consideration half so much as a sound of swift, chattering human speech, emanating from the pagoda, and bearing news that yet others of Charles's Mongolian myrmidons were about.

"Quick!" snapped Tolliver. "We mustn't be seen!"

Soft-footed, he dashed back toward the terrace, but this time on the hedge's inner side. I was at his heels when he dodged beneath a curtain of some kind of yellow-blossoming vine, and I followed him.

We had entered what proved to be an ornamental grotto, though it was darksome-ly damp enough to have been the mouth of a cavern or cellar. I knocked my shins on a box of gardener's tools, sat down on it to recover breath—and realized that I ought to have dropped my would-be cousin-in-law outside. Now I was going to have the deuce of a time framing up an excuse to leave him.

"Three of us kids," said Tolliver, "foiled old Mason's head gardener by hiding in here one whole afternoon. We got home around 11 P.M., and the neighborhood was out hunting us through the woods with lanterns."

"Those were the happy days," I said sarcastically. "Too bad you ever grew up, Tolliver."

I heard him turn in the dark.

"What's wrong with you?" he demanded. "If we're here on a fool's errand, it's your fault. If we're not, I can see nothing shamefully kiddish in what we are doing."

I couldn't tell him that the kiddish part was in suspecting the Governor of forcibly abducting his former secretary. At the first hint that she was here of her own free will fireworks were due. So I pivoted and said:

"Your way is more dashing than mine would have been, but possibly it's the best. I'm more concerned than I seem, old man. I haven't your patience to lurk here in the dark. I'm going out and—"

"You are not!" His big body barred the way. "Sh!" he added sibilantly. "Some one is coming!"

Close to the grotto a flight of marble steps cut the terrace, and it was a click of heels and slight scrape of descending feet on these which he had heard. Intuition informed me who was approaching. Had it been any other two people, intuition would probably have sounded the same alarm in my then state of mind, but for once the inner monitor was right.

Tolliver had parted the vines which partially screened our retreat and was peering out. I followed his example.

Two figures, a man and a woman, came into view and strolled a few paces along the shore of the pool. They halted directly beneath a great lantern of painted silk, one of the many which lent the sunken garden so Oriental an appearance. It cast a ruddy glow downward upon them. I could feel the eager tremor which shook the man beside me as recognition became sure.

The woman was Veronica and Governor Charles was the man. Fate, which might so easily have been kinder, had led them as directly to us as if by intentional appointment.

My cousin looked very slim, innocent and young, standing there in the rosy light beside her lover. She was dressed in a blue, droopy gown of long, soft lines, with a filmy scarf flung loosely about her shoulders. Hers was a face of tender, almost childish curves, crowned by hair like soft, pale gold. Her brows and lashes, however, were very dark, shading slate-gray eyes—the kind of eyes that give one a fresh little thrill of pleased surprise every time one looks at them. With those eyes, and with her red little mouth, dimpled chin, and

Dresden shepherdess nose, no man would at first sight ever pick Ronny Wyndham for any task more intellectual than choosing a trousseau suited to her charms.

Yet packed in that small round skull under its fluffy adornment were brains of a quality to be respected. Good sense, too, or so I had believed until to-day.

To me, with that scrap of letter burning my pocket, Charles seemed to tower over her, to dominate her. Like a malignant jinnee of the fairest outward seeming, his personality had engulfed that of my poor little cousin and swept her helplessly from home and honor.

As I stared with tingling hatred at the face of Veronica's successful lover, I forgot the cheated man at my side. Reversing the situation as I had foreseen it, it was Rex's hand which restrained me from rushing out to force a precipitate reckoning. His grip brought me to my senses, and at the same moment Ronny spoke.

Throughout the dialogue which ensued, we in the grotto stood just so, and as I listened I realized that for the second time that day all my ideas must be astonishingly reversed.

Well-nigh too astonishingly, in fact. Though I could place but one construction upon the words uttered, all the while I had the oddest feeling that what I heard could not be true. Or that some other truth underlay it, as the real life of an actor underlies his stage presentation. Perhaps the theatric background of colored lamps and reflecting pool played a part in that impression.

"When is this folly to end?" Ronny turned with an impatient gesture from contemplation of the scarlet-pagodaed islet. Her tone was as unsentimental as the question. "You have held me here for a week. Don't you yet realize the hopelessness and the madness of what you are doing?"

"The end rests with you," Charles responded quietly.

"It won't rest with either of us soon. Every day increases your risk of discovery. And when you are found out, don't you think I have friends who care enough for me to see you punished? Haven't you any regard left for your own—I won't say

honor, but for your ambitions? Why, the very position that saves you from suspicion—"

"Will make the crash bigger if I'm found out," he broke in, with grim acquiescence. "And the love that risks a sacrifice like that means nothing to you!"

"Love and sacrifice! Those are beautiful words. They're not fit for a man like you to use! What happiness can you imagine would come of it, if I should surrender? Do you want a wife who hates and despises you? Why, when I was walking beside you just now I wondered how you could endure the company of a person whom you have so wronged."

"Yet you came out with me to-night."

"You said you had something to tell me. I was foolish enough to hope that at last your manhood had awakened and you meant to let me go. I won't be your wife—no! And if you don't free me soon, you will have to keep me cooped up here the rest of my life—if you can succeed in doing it. Let me go now, and I'll keep still—that's the price I offer, and you will be wiser to accept. You are behaving like a Chinese mandarin, who wishes a slave, not a wife, and I would as soon be married to one." She glanced scornfully about the garden. "These surroundings are very suitable to your idea of love."

He laughed, but with no amusement.

"I didn't design these gardens, though I heard that Bartoli regarded them as some of his best work. I did think that their beauty would please you. As I've said often enough, I only bought the place for you, Veronica. Till you came into my life I never knew the purpose or need of beautiful lands and flower and jewels. I would like to give you every beautiful thing there is in the world. You don't really hate me as you think. You cannot—must not! No other man could care for you as I do."

"I hope not." Her tone was icily unresponsive. "To have seen the beast and tyrant aroused in one man is more than sufficient."

"Stop!" That controlled, flexible voice of his quivered slightly. His face went suddenly darker in the lantern-light. "Have I harmed you? Have I so much as

touched your hand since you came here? If you really believed me beast and tyrant, you would not dare call me so!"

Ronny's dimpled chin went up in that defiant fearlessness which was so incongruous to her appearance and so exactly expressed her inward spirit.

"At heart you are precisely what I said! You are afraid to touch me because you are afraid to drive me through the one door of escape you have left open!"

He drew back, with a slightly ironical bow. "Aren't we verging the least bit on melodrama, Veronica?"

"A courtship that includes a kidnaping can hardly escape melodrama." Suddenly she laughed, and her mirth had a ring of sincerity. "The situation is so preposterous that I can hardly even yet believe that it's real. You—the Governor of this State, a man of your reputation and standing—"

"To love so deeply that nothing counts beside. No doubt it is amusing."

"But you don't love me. If you loved me, I should be at home this moment. The simple truth is that you set your will against mine, and when I declined to be mastered by you, you resorted to trickery and violence rather than have your will crossed!"

"You can put it that way, but—"

"It's true. If you really want me to believe differently, let me go home!"

"I can't do that. Will you walk further? Or do you hate the night and the flowers for my sake?"

"Let me go!"

"Not yet—never, if I can hold you so long."

"Now!" whispered Rex in my ear, and the two of us, one in purpose at last, burst through the curtaining screen of vines.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK. Don't forget this magazine is issued weekly, and that you will get the continuation of this story without waiting a month.

The Labyrinth

by Francis Stevens

Author of "The Nightmare," etc.

PRECEDING CHAPTERS BRIEFLY RETOLD

I'M Hildreth Wyndham. I'm rich, but not so rich as the reporters make me out to be. Also I'm lazy, and it was horribly early when Rex Tolliver came charging into my bedroom with the news that Ronny had disappeared.

Now, Veronica Wyndham and I may be only first cousins, but we might be twins the way we love each other. So I jumped into action like a shot.

Ronny needn't have worked; she could have had her pick of all the nicest boys in our set by crooking a finger. But she was independent, and so she got a job with Carpenter & Charles, real estate, and became so efficient that Carpenter was heart-broken when his partner, Charles, borrowed her to act as his private secretary. For Charles, you see, Clinton Charles, was Governor of the State.

This was a little while before, of course. Ronny had secretaried for the Governor for a year or so, and then had quit, and next I knew she was engaged to Rex Tolliver. And now she had vanished into thin air. Her proper companion and chaperon, Mrs. Sandry, was sick with it all and I couldn't see her, and nobody else knew a thing. Rex had taken her home a couple of evenings before, and they'd had a spat, and that was all *he* knew.

Well, I got a sort of fool hunch, and went to see the Governor. He was nice to me, but when I blurted out my subconscious thought:

"Do you know where she is?"—he naturally just stared at me and said: "Mr.—Wyndham!"

Well, that was all I could have expected—until I found a half-destroyed letter in Ronny's writing addressed to "My dear Clinton," and declining with thanks an invitation to visit his new estate, Asgard Heights! Then and there I determined to go to Asgard Heights myself and interview "dear Clinton."

As luck would have it, who should I run into on the road but Rex! And Rex suspected that I knew something, and when I made up a suspicion that Ronny'd been kidnaped by politicians and was being held at Asgard, why he bit, and insisted on going along. In fact, he led the way, through a sort of back door to the estate, which he knew of as a boy when old Mason, the late and deceased owner of the Heights, was in power.

And finally we found Ronny—and the Governor—and she was demanding that he let her go!

"Not yet—never, if I can hold you so long," the Governor told her steadily.

"Now!" whispered Rex in my ear, and the two of us burst through the screening curtain of vines.

CHAPTER XI.

FLIGHT.

WHEN Rex insisted on invading Asgard Heights, I had dreaded some startling dénouement. I had accompanied him in such misery of mind as I had never before experienced. The tale he had swallowed seemed to me so absurd that I called him a fool for believing.

Yet his very credulity had prepared him for a fact more amazing than my fabrication. Having accepted the idea of Governor Charles as a kidnaper for political reasons,

to find him in the same guilt for a more romantic cause only stimulated Tolliver's indignation.

A psychologist might have read in Charles's visionary eyes and determined chin the capacity for some such enormous folly as that conversation had revealed, but to me the discovery came as a shock.

It was in a hysterical mood between laughter and relief that I followed Tolliver from the grotto, no longer fearing anything. In the bare fact of discovery, Charles was lost, and at that moment I almost pitied him.

This story began in the All-Story Weekly for July 27.

But Tolliver, seeing not the victim of a gigantic folly, but an unscrupulous and dangerous enemy, ran truer to form.

When the grotto disgorged its rescue-party, Veronica cried out, and, instinctively, I think, for he could not have recognized us at first glance, Charles sprang between us and the girl.

His hand dropped toward a coat-pocket, but Rex caught his wrist, at the same moment jamming the muzzle of his own pistol against the Governor's vest.

"One struggle or shout for help, and you're a dead man, Charles!"

"Hildreth!" cried Ronny. "You've come at last!"

And running past the other two she threw her arms around my neck and frankly hugged me.

That was all right, and I was glad enough to return the embrace. It didn't strike me until later that Tolliver might not like her greeting me with enthusiasm and ignoring him.

"Yes," I said, "and it's time, eh? Why, Ronny, everybody in Marshall City has been hunting for you. This last week has been—"

"Hil," broke in Tolliver, in a somewhat strained voice, "will you kindly take this scoundrel's pistol from his pocket? Both my hands are occupied."

At the words, Charles, who had stood perfectly motionless, very rigid and white of face, came unexpectedly to life.

There was a swift flurry of action, too quick for my eyes to accurately follow. I think that Charles tried to knock aside the automatic with his left hand and wrench himself free. Had Rex remembered his safety catch, that attempt would have finished the Governor. But the catch was on, the trigger of course resisted all pressure, and what might have been prompt tragedy ended in a rough-and-tumble fight.

They went to the turf with Rex uppermost, rolled over a couple of times, and, still locked in an energetic tangle of legs and arms, slid off the bank and splashed resoundingly down among the lotus blossoms of the pool.

Then Veronica, for the first time in her life, so far as I know, really screamed. I

had forgotten the voices we had heard earlier from the pagoda, but as her shrill woman's cry cut the night, two men came flying out of the pagoda and across the bridge toward us.

Seeing Rex's pistol where he had dropped it, I snatched up the weapon and went to meet them. Rex was an A-1 swimmer and his plunge into that fancy pool didn't alarm me, but I thought the arrival of those Celestial gardeners superfluous.

They seemed to agree. Having faced for one second the pistol's threatening muzzle, they beat an agitated retreat back over the bridge. I let them go. In fact, I couldn't have stopped them. I tried to fire a shot in the air after them, found the catch down, and by the time it was released they were out of sight in the pagoda, whence their shrill voices rose to heaven in frantic yells, addressed, I assumed, to such of their fellows as might be within hearing distance.

It seemed a good idea to leave before any saffron-skinned horde should rush to their master's succor.

I ran back toward where I had left Ronny, and found her down at the pool-edge, tugging at somebody's collar.

"Leggo!" came Rex's voice, half-strangled. "Y're ch-choking me!"

"Let him alone!" I dropped on my knees beside Ronny and caught her well-intentioned hands away. Released, Rex's head and shoulders subsided under water, but promptly reappeared in a complicated swirl of lotus stems. Another head came up close by. Rex dived for it and they both went under.

"Oh, they'll kill each other—they'll be drowned!" sobbed Veronica.

Knowing Rex's pertinacity, I thought it possible myself. Though a poor swimmer, I was kicking off my shoes preparatory to joining the submarine struggle, when the two rose together within arm's reach. They continued to rise until they were no more than chest-deep, and I perceived that Rex, at least, was standing.

"Lend me a hand, can't you?" he said crossly. A minute later I was helping Rex to scramble out on the bank, dragging with him a very limp Governor.

"It's shallow; all mud below—and these

confounded weeds!" Rex disgustedly removed a pink lotus-bloom, draped coquettishly over his ear, and flung it from him. "I ought to have let him down in the mud, if he wanted to."

Though conscious, Charles lay gasping helplessly on the turf, while Ronny still sobbed and the pagoda-hid Celestials continued to split the night with vociferous appeals for aid. The whole affair could not have consumed more than four minutes' time.

Stooping, Tolliver half jerked, half lifted his unscrupulous rival to his feet. With a beautiful continuity of purpose, he plunged a hand into one of Charles's dripping pockets and removed the automatic which reposed there. That the Governor should carry one was not surprising, under the circumstances.

"Let's get out of this, Tolliver," I said. "All the Chinks on the place will be down on us in a minute."

"They'll do anything *he* says." Ronny nodded at Charles. "They'll never let us out unless he orders them to."

"He'll give the order all right," I said with conviction.

"He tried to drown us both in the mud there." Rex seemed to be still indignant. "He's desperate. We'll go out as we came in, and it won't be necessary to trust him."

"Have your own way," I yielded hastily, "but let's move! Come, Ronny!"

The ululations from the pagoda were being answered by shrill shouts from the houseward direction. A distant slap and patter of flat-shod feet announced the approach of reinforcements.

With two pistols and the Governor for hostage we might have stood them off, but heroics come easier in theory than practise. There is something curiously alarming in the swift approach of many inimical feet through the night.

I won't speak for Rex. His actions may have been the result of sober judgment without a trace of panic. But the instant I took Ronny's arm and started to run I felt like a scared rabbit. All the stories I had ever heard of Chinese knives and Chinese disregard for life lent me energy, and, as panic is contagious, Ronny caught

it. She flew along beside me at a pace to discount all claims that skirts are a hindrance to speed. I am recording an unheroic retreat without apology.

In five seconds we were out of the sunken garden and scampering lightly across a wide expanse of open lawn. There were too many lights. Our shadows fled about us in every direction, expanding and contracting, flat-black monsters on the dew-glinting grass.

Ahead some kind of high level barrier loomed darkly. It proved to be an unusually high hedge of clipped yew. Running beside it a few paces we came to a break, like a gateway, dodged through and—another similar wall faced us with no gateway.

It was dark in the shadow of those parallel hedges, and we came to an uncertain halt. The night was warm, and fragrant with the scent of flowers. Somewhere men were running and shouting, but the sounds were far away. We had fled like two frightened children, and a sense of acute shame overtook me.

"Where is Rex?" Veronica's question brought home my guilt. Conscience smote me yet more sharply when I found that Tolliver's pistol was still in my hand. Then I remembered having seen him commandeer the Governor's, so that was all right, but why had I run at all—and from a pack of cowardly Chinamen?

"I supposed he was following us," I muttered. "I'll go back."

"Where are you, Hil?"

Tolliver was calling, low-voiced, from outside.

"Thought I'd lost you," he complained as we both appeared in the hedge-gate. "We can't afford to get separated."

"My fault," I admitted. "But is it necessary to drag *him* with us?"

Rex was not alone. At pistol-point, evidently, he had brought his rival along, and I suppose that Charles, his fighting impulse cooled by the underwater struggle, and realizing that his world was tottering to a fall, had not cared enough to resist.

"I presume," said Rex sarcastically, "that you would have left him behind to direct his servants in pursuit."

Charles spoke, for the first time since our emergence from the grotto.

"You have no need to fear my servants," he said in a low voice. "Come back to the house and I'll send you home in my car. I'm—finished, of course."

"Don't trust him!" warned Ronny, with what I recognized as a deliberately retaliatory note. He was down and I was a bit sorry for him, but my cousin seemed not inclined to mercy. "Governor Charles believes in the right of force and considers himself above the law."

"I don't mean to trust him," responded Rex matter-of-factly. "We'll go home in my car, not his. Quick! Out of sight! They're coming!"

Several figures had burst into view on the open lawn's far side, but I doubt if they even glimpsed us. We bolted into the dark alley between the hedges, Ronny and I again leading, and Rex still dragging his unresistant captive.

CHAPTER XII.

AN IMPEDED RESCUE.

THE path between was not of gravel, but carpeted with grass, in which our feet made little sound. For light we had only starshine and what faint trickles of radiance pierced the thick wall of yew from the bright lit lawn beyond. However, within ten yards I sensed a blacker blackness to the left, which proved to be another opening, this time through the inner hedge.

The other two close at our heels, Ronny and I turned the corner and went straight ahead, walking now, for it was too dark to run.

The shrill, excited yelps of our pursuers sounded more distant every moment. It occurred to me that those Chinamen might be none too anxious to run to earth a quarry armed and desperado-like, as the ones I had driven back at the bridge no doubt reported us.

Walking straight on in the dark, we violently encountered another hedge at right angles to the path. Ronny and I retired as gracefully as might be from the collision and, yielding to the hedge's compulsory

guidance, we again proceeded, though in a new direction. When the same incident was twice repeated, with variations of angle, I began to weary of the eccentricities of our journey.

"What is this place anyway?" I inquired at large, rubbing a twig-scratched face. "There's more hedge than path."

"We're in the maze," volunteered Charles, and added gloomily: "We'll spend the night here if you go much further."

Then I recalled my guide-book informant and his reference to "the pleasing revival by Mr. Mason of that old-fashioned fancy, a bewildering series of paths and lanes shut in by hedges, called a maze, and once so popular on the more pretentious estates."

"Know the way through, Tolliver?" I asked hopefully. Heretofore he had gone as one carrying an accurate brain map of the Asgard Heights grounds.

But he failed us now. "These hedges weren't here a dozen years ago," he explained.

"Go back," advised Veronica sensibly. "We might wander here for hours."

In perfect accord for once, the four of us volte-faced and executed another retreat, but the tangled alleys in which we had entrapped ourselves proved less easy to escape than one would have supposed.

In entering we had turned four times, twice to the left and twice to the right. I was sure of that, but to my disgust the others disagreed. They followed my lead without argument till the second turning, which Ronny insisted came too soon, and Rex said was in the wrong direction. Charles ventured no opinion, having relapsed into melancholy and indifferent silence.

Rex got his way at last by sheer persistence. He may have been right, for all I know, and the next may have been the fatal turning that lost us. After that, however, we turned and turned, wound back and forth, found ourselves in unexpected culs-de-sac, and generally enjoyed the "pleasing fancy" of the diabolically clever person who had planned those hedges.

By this time, as if by conspiracy, the sky had clouded over, and the many electric lights, of which I had once foolishly com-

plained, seemed to have been obliterated with the stars. No least gleam of them now penetrated the mad tangle of leafy walls in which we were involved. I had a few matches, but they were soon exhausted. Of course, it was no use for Charles and Tolliver to search their drenched pockets.

Sounds from without, even the most blood-curdling yells, would have been welcome now, for we had reached that point of confusion where we were no longer sure that even in a general way we were moving toward the circumference of the maze. Save, however, for the occasional cry of a bird, or chirp of insects, the silence and darkness were equally complete.

Charles, I am sure, was free to have departed our company a dozen times over, for even Rex had lost interest in everything but a passionate distaste for overgrown yew hedges. But, perhaps in the love of misery for companionship, he seemed more inclined to cling to us than leave us.

Recalling his existence at last, Rex demanded information as to exactly how many square miles the maze covered.

"About a quarter mile across, I believe," replied its owner. "I've never been in here before."

"Any one who came here intentionally would be— Why didn't you warn us what we were getting into?"

"That's unfair," broke in Veronica unexpectedly. "He did warn you, Rex."

Her fiancé muttered something undistinguishable, then added aloud: "We'll have to break through these hedges in a straight line till we're out, if it's a quarter of a mile or ten miles. Come on, Hil, get to work."

We tried it.

Did you ever attempt to break through a hedge of healthy, well-cared-for yew? With a machete, or even an ax, that mode of progress may be possible, if not expeditious. We had no machete and no ax—and very little temper by the time we made up our minds to desist.

By another inspiration I climbed on Tolliver's shoulders and peered across the tops of the hedges. The lights of the house were not visible, nor were any lights visible anywhere.

The discovery gave me a queer sensation

—like returning into a room one has left brightly lighted a moment before, and finding it in pitch darkness. There was a flashing suspicion that I had gone suddenly blind without knowing it. But that was absurd. Climbing down I reported.

"This is some of your doing!" snarled Rex. I assumed that he was addressing the Governor, and it was Charles who answered out of the darkness.

"I wish it were," he said with a sort of depressed humor. "If I could turn off the lights from here, I could certainly turn them on again, and we might get somewhere. Do you suppose that I am enjoying this—this prolonged agony?"

"Please let's not waste time quarreling," put in Ronny's sweet contralto. "Li Ching may have turned off the lights."

"Who or which is Li Ching?" I asked.

"The butler. He's the funniest old Chinaman. He does almost everything backward, and it would be just like him to think that throwing off the lights would keep us from getting away."

"Well, it is keeping us, isn't it?" Rex seemed to be in an extraordinary irritable mood, quite different to his temper just before the rescue.

"So it appears." The contralto was now a bit more cool than sweet. "Hildreth, won't you take my hand again? I'm afraid of being separated from you."

"Wow!" I thought. "There's a hint to moderate your tone, friend Tolliver!"

Since the alternative to playing blind man's buff with those hedges was standing still, the game proceeded. There was not even the slope of ground which one might reasonably expect on a mountainside to guide us. Asgard Heights itself was built on an outstanding shoulder of Kennett Mountain. The surrounding lawns and gardens were by no means level, but the maze was an exception. Its turfed ground throughout was as flat as a tennis-court.

At least it seemed so until my trustful foot descended into vacancy, and I saved myself from pitching headlong only by a quick reverse which made me sit down with violence, dragging Ronny along.

"Look out!" I ejaculated. "Here's a precipice or something!"

On investigation the precipice proved to be a short flight of descending stone steps.

"We've reached the center," Charles observed. His voice sounded oddly tremulous. Both he and Tolliver were dripping wet, and Charles, at least, had reached the shivering stage. "There is some kind of pavilion or rest-house here," he added shakily. "You go—go d-down these steps to it."

"Thought you'd never been here," growled Tolliver the suspicious.

"I d-did not say I had never seen the gr-ground plans."

"No, but we don't put much value on what you say, one way or the other."

"Oh, let up, Tolliver," I broke in. For the last half-hour he had been flinging similar remarks at the unhappy Governor, and I was sick of hearing them. Too much like nagging at a condemned man. "If this is the center, let's cross it and start fresh on the other side. Where are you, Ronny?"

"Here." Her firm, slim hand met mine. As we went cautiously down the steps I thought what a good, satisfactory little pal she was. Not a word of complaint from her yet, though as rescuers Tolliver and I had made rather a mess of it.

To our eyes, inured to the blackness of the hedges, this central space was almost visible. I could make out Ronny's white figure and face moving beside me, and ahead something dim, big and solid, which must be the pavilion. An idea struck me.

If this building, I said, were wired for lights—as it probably was—and if we could find the switch, and if it were on a separate circuit from the rest of the grounds—why couldn't we light up the pavilion and gain a point of direction?

A lot of "ifs" as Tolliver unkindly remarked, but Ronny supported my suggestion. Still hand in hand, we felt our way up some more stone steps into the pavilion.

I heard Rex and his inseparable antagonist following just behind.

Exactly what form of structure the place had, darkness forbade our knowing. It seemed to be built of marble, or some other smoothly polished stone, and in entering we passed between round, thick pillars. Within, the blackness was impenetrable.

Ardently I wished for those wasted matches now. Still, there was a hit-or-miss chance that we might find a switch-box by feeling along the walls.

In ten minutes we had determined that the pavilion was round, the walls formed of polished stone panels set between pilasters, and that it had no windows nor entrances save the one we had come in by. This not particularly helpful knowledge was our sole reward.

We met at last in a discouraged group near the center. There was a thing there shaped like a sun-dial—or a very thick broken-off column. It rose from the floor to about the height of my chest. The top seemed carved in deep relief, and, leaning wearily against it as we talked, my fingers strayed over the carving.

"If you would sh-shout for help," shivered Charles, "or allow me to, we might be heard. W-won't you take my assurance that I've given up all hope of—of—have given up all hope? What can you fear? That I would have you m-murdered—in c-cold blood?"

"How do we know?" came Tolliver's inevitable retort. "It's no great step from kidnaping to throat-cutting."

I heard a sound suspiciously like a hysterical giggle, but the voice that followed from that direction was sweetly dignified.

"Governor Charles can hope to deceive none of us as to his true character, but—I think perhaps it would be best to shout. You see, Rex, even though *he* may deserve to perish of pneumonia, you're both equally drenched. I think we've been lost long enough. Governor Charles has a chill now, and you'll have one soon, unless you get dry clothes."

"Anticlimax for hero and villain," I thought with an inward chuckle.

My fingers, which had been half unconsciously tracing the raised carving of the pillar-top, closed on a piece that was loose. Being very human fingers, they tried to loosen it some more. It wouldn't lift, but it slid along smoothly for about an inch, as if in a groove.

"I'm hard as nails," Rex was saying impatiently. "Thanks for—"

I don't know what he was going to thank

her for, because just then something happened.

It was sudden as lightning, and as disconcerting as an earthquake.

With a horrible, shuddering vibration and a sound like the groan of a cracked iron bell, the solid stone beneath us tipped, sank away, was gone. In one sliding, struggling heap, the four of us were unceremoniously dropped through the treacherously yawning floor of the pavilion.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE RESCUE PROCEEDS UNDERGROUND.

THE unguessed abyss into which we had been precipitated wasn't very much of an abyss, and its bottom had been considerably padded. My sprawling and astonished self landed unhurt on a soft, feather-cushiony surface some eight feet below.

Overhead there came a recurrence of that metallic groaning, followed by a sharp click.

Almost more amazing than the fall itself was the fact that we had dropped out of midnight darkness into a place filled with light. I realized it dazedly, though, of course, till my eyes had time to get adjusted, I couldn't see a thing.

"Ronny!" I called, scrambling up anyhow. "Ronny! Are you there? Are you hurt?"

"Oh!" said a small voice close by, and "Oh!" again, as if that covered the situation.

"Yes, oh! But are you hurt?"

I staggered forward, my feet sinking deep in the cushiony floor, collided heavily with another bedazzled staggerer, and then a pair of steely hands closed on my throat.

"You devil!" hissed Tolliver's voice between set teeth. "You sprang that trap—but you'll pay for it!"

I'm not so big as Rex, but the footing was uncertain and I easily tripped him. We went to the mat together, his hold was broken by the fall and I wriggled away.

"What the *deuce* are you trying to do?" I gasped angrily.

"Hil! I thought—thought you were that scoundrel, Charles!"

"Well, I'm not. Look who you're choking next time. Ronny, where are you, anyway?"

But even as I spoke my vision cleared, and I saw my companions and the place we had been tumbled into.

It was a white-walled chamber, round like the pavilion, and some twelve feet in diameter. The floor was covered by a tufted padding, upholstered in forest-green, very thick and soft. As I had already surmised, the ceiling, which was, of course, the floor of the pavilion, had closed again after letting us through. Its under-side was covered with a layer of elaborately embossed metal, painted in brilliant colors, and so designed that it would be almost impossible to say where the piece or pieces which opened were joined.

Four narrow archways led out of the circular room, and over each of these was an electric globe and some kind of motto painted in black on the white wall.

As for my fellow victims, Rex still crouched, blinking at me, while a little way off Charles, for whom I had just suffered as proxy, was helping Veronica to her feet.

My cousin's pale-gold hair was tumbled about her shoulders. She was staring up into Charles's face, her lips quivering like a child's about to cry.

Tolliver and I reached them at the same moment. After glaring at us as if he intended to dispute our right to take her away from him, the Governor turned his back and moved off. Veronica looked after him with an expression which we interpreted as amazement that he had dared touch her.

While Rex scowled threatfully at the Governor's back, I cooed over my poor little frightened cousin like a sentimental maiden aunt till she began to laugh at herself and me.

"I'm not a bit hurt," she protested, twisting up her fallen hair. "But where—what is this place?"

"Ask the owner!" Tolliver still glowered. "He dropped us down here—this is a regular trap."

"He fell into it himself then," objected Ronny.

I had a startling recollection.

"If you want to see the real villain," I modestly observed, "look at little Hildreth. No, I mean it." I related how my fingers had closed over that loose carving on the sawed-off column. "It slid along, and this is the result. Plain as a pikestaff. That carving controlled the mechanism of a trap-door."

"Maybe," Rex skeptically admitted, "but I still think it was his doing and that he only came down with us by a slip."

Charles had been standing hands on hips, head thrown back, staring as if reproachfully at that treacherous ceiling. Now he turned again and came toward us across the yielding floor.

Recalling my interview with him that morning, I thought what a vast difference a few hours and emotions can work in a man. That he should be white, even haggard was not surprising; but more than that, Charles looked as if he had been sick—sick a long time with some devastating fever. Yet he had regained control of himself. For all the misery his eyes reported, he was managing to face us and smile, which must have required some moral courage, of whatever quality.

"Old M-Mason," he said, "seems to have b-been a pr-practical joker."

"You'll have to check that chill in some way," announced Ronny irrelevantly. "Whisky would do. Doesn't any one of you carry a flask?"

It appeared that Rex did, but obviously he objected to Ronny's concern for his fallen rival, and it was equally obvious that carbolic acid would have been as welcome to Charles as a drink of whisky which he had to accept from Tolliver.

I admired Ronny's calm indifference to the sentiments of either. The drink was given and taken under her inflexible direction, Rex had one himself, I did not refuse my share, and then consideration of Mr. Mason's "practical joke" could be resumed.

By Charles's story, in the plans of Asgard Heights there was shown at the center of the maze a small, round building, of more or less Grecian architecture. As for a trick opening in the floor operated or controlled by a movable bit of carving, there was no

indication of it on the plans or in the written descriptions, and he swore he had never heard any hint of such a place existing beneath the pavilion. Personally he had never explored the grounds to any extent—he had no leisure to waste in that manner. No, he had never heard a word of it from any servant or employee. Every one knew what an eccentric old fellow Mason had been. This must be some device of his, built secretly and designed for a purpose as unknown to him, Charles, as to us.

Certainly the place was an elaborate and intentional trap, but the wherefore of it remained to be discovered.

Tolliver was inclined to sneer at the Governor's claim of ignorance, but those four archways were beckoning to my curiosity. I proposed exploration as more profitable than holding impromptu court to try Charles's veracity.

As I have said, over every arch there was a light, which we surmised might have been turned on by the same mechanism that sprang the trap. This assumed Charles's story to be true. They certainly couldn't have been burning ever since Mason died, nearly a year previous.

Beyond the archways four flights of stairs curved downward out of our view, and we could tell by the reflection on the curving, white-painted walls that there were other lights. All the stairs turned in the same direction—to the right as one faced them.

Hoping to find some clue, we read the mottoes painted in old English characters just below the electric globes. They left us more puzzled than before. The four inscriptions had been culled from the Old Testament, and not only did they offer no guidance, but the selections had been made from the more vengeful utterances of the Prophets, and every one of them read depressingly like a threat.

"'Rejoice not against me, mine enemy,'" Veronica read aloud thoughtfully; "'when I fall I shall arise.' That's not quite so—so unfriendly as the others. Let's try this 'Rejoice not' one first."

She set foot boldly on the first step of her preferred stair. Tolliver and I started after her, but to my surprise Charles caught at my sleeve detainingly.

"Wyndham," he said earnestly, "she ought to wait here and let us explore. We don't know what those stairs lead to. It may be something—unpleasant."

For a moment I hesitated, wondering if he might not be right. Or was he trying to split our party?

"We'll stick together," I said, "and, if you don't mind, I'll bring up the rear."

I stood aside for him to pass me. He looked at me, opened his lips, then compressed them firmly and went ahead without argument.

We had fallen into this peculiar situation because of one almost incredible act on the part of our esteemed Governor. Tolliver's suspicions since the rescue might be exaggerated, but I myself had no mind to let Charles be tempted to any further novel extensions of the gubernatorial power.

He shouldn't leave us, and he would bear watching while with us. Ronny was an inspiration to care which I didn't intend to forget.

CHAPTER XIV.

ALARMING DISCOVERIES.

THE stairs led to a straight, narrow passage ending in a blind wall. Three other passages, similar to the first, branched off from it at varying angles.

Our first impression of these underground corridors was an extraordinary one. They were decorated with half-inch stripes of black on a white ground. The stripes ran up from a dead-black floor to the ceiling, across, and down the opposite wall. It gave an effect like the bars of a cage, and a perspective that was bewilderingly tiresome to the eyes.

The small electric bulbs placed at intervals were unfrosted and without globes. This so increased the dazzling effect that we only discovered the branch passages as we reached them. Adventuring a few paces along one of these branch ways, we came on yet another zebra-striped corridor opening from it.

"I believe," declared Ronny, suddenly inspired, "that we are in an underground duplicate of the privet maze—and we'd best

be careful. This is precisely the way we lost ourselves up there."

"It looks so, but read that." I pointed out another inscription, set in a lozenge of white on the end wall of the passage we stood in. "'Arise ye and depart, for this is not your rest.' Invitation to proceed. There must be something down here besides these futurist corridors."

Tolliver got out a pencil.

"If this is a second maze, we don't have to get lost." He made a cross on one of the white stripes of the wall. The pencil was soft and the mark stood out well against the painted cement. "We'll blaze a trail, and in that way can always return to the center. The hedges were a different proposition."

"Hello!" I said. "Some former victim had your bright idea, Rex. See his mark?"

It was a small, lop-sided cross that looked as if it had been smeared on the wall by a finger dipped in thin, reddish-brown paint. A few yards further along Veronica pointed to another white stripe.

"There's a red mark, too. But it's a circle instead of a cross."

With an impatient shake of the head, Rex made his own symbol, bold and black, just under the circle.

"Silly game for a man like Mason to waste money on," he commented. "The old fellow must have reached his second childhood."

Still hoping for something more interesting than empty passages, we followed the new angle, passed a couple of corridors, turned into a third, chose another intersection, another—and brought up at a blind wall, which announced the inevitable inscription:

**That Which Is Crooked Cannot Be Made
Straight, and That Which Is Wanting
Cannot be Numbered.**

"Oh—rot!" exclaimed Tolliver irreverently. "What a *fool* game!"

Retracing our steps, we felt ready to cease exploring and try what could be done toward reopening the pavilion trap from below. A child-minded person with time on his hands, well-fed and dryly clothed against the damp chill of the corridors,

might have enjoyed losing himself here. As for us, we had had enough.

Following Tolliver's black crosses we—reached another blind wall. Yet there was the pencil mark, five feet from the end and directly beneath a light.

"That's queer," I said. "That can't be your cross, Tolliver. It's an old one that somebody else marked up."

"It's mine. See how each line ends in a hook? I did that purposely to identify my own mark—and besides, I remember putting it there."

His insistence gave one a sickish, unnatural feeling—like meeting a blank impossibility and being forced to believe in it. One does that sometimes in a dream.

The end wall announced unconsolingly:

He Hath Hedged Me About That I Cannot Get Out; He Hath Made My Chain Heavy.

Our eyes sought each other's faces.

"That's not my mark," Rex contradicted himself suddenly. He hastily scribbled his initials, "R. T.," beside the hooked cross. "There. I shouldn't have used a cross, of course. Everybody makes crosses—or circles. We've passed a dozen red ones, and there are probably plenty of pencil crosses scattered about. Luckily we haven't come far."

Had we retained any faith in Tolliver's hooked crosses as guidance, we should have been quickly disillusioned. It seemed best to follow back along what must be a false trail to the point where it diverged from the true one. But instead of success in this, we met only another cul-de-sac, ominously inscribed:

I Also Will Laugh at Your Calamity; I Will Mock when Your Fear Cometh.

At that we laughed a little ourselves. These sententious quotations were so plainly meant to inspire terror that they overshoot the mark. Yet they angered one, too. They had begun to take on an air of vicious and personal attack.

"You—you *mean* old man!" Ronny shook her head at the painted taunt, as if it directly represented Mr. Daniel Mason. "Your joke is so ill-natured that it isn't the least bit funny!"

Nobody thought of even hinting that it was funny when a line of "R. T.'s" *plus* hooked crosses brought us straight to a blocked passage and the mocking statement that:

**As the Fishes That Are Taken in an Evil Net,
so Are the Sons of Men Snared in
an Evil Time.**

"Were we here before?" demanded the owner of the initials dazedly. "I don't remember—"

"There's been *nothing* said about fishes in any place we've gone!" Ronny declared positively. "We aren't alone down here. I've been certain for some minutes that I heard footfalls and a kind of rushing noise in the corridors we had just passed through, but I thought the sounds might be echoes. They weren't. Some one is following us about and writing up copies of your mark, Rex. Listen!"

We did listen, with the strained alertness of people who have agreed to spend the night in a haunted house—"Such a lark if one really should meet a ghost, you know!"—and are suddenly very much afraid that the ghost has audibly materialized.

Not that we were superstitious. If any one but ourselves were present, the person was a flesh-and-blood human, to be hunted out, captured, and forced to explain himself. But why—well, what malevolent sort of a human would it be who dwelt mysteriously in a secret labyrinth, and trailed us to forge our blaze-marks?

We listened. There was no sound but our own breathing, and very little of that.

Yet Ronny had not been alone in hearing "echoes." They had been troubling me for ten minutes past, and I had seen both Tolliver and Charles cast an occasional startled glance backward as we passed from one corridor to another.

Suddenly the Governor, who had been straining his ears with the rest of us, gave a muttered exclamation.

"What's that?" Tolliver turned on him with quick suspicion. "You know all about this!" he accused.

"I think I do." The Governor's smile was half-bored, half-amused. "The explanation is staring us in the face. A small

boy of average intelligence might have guessed it earlier."

Still smiling, he walked to the dead-wall that ended the passage. Raising one hand he struck it a sharp blow with the heel of his palm. The "wall" gave out a hollow, metallic clang and rattled slightly in its place.

"That's a door," said Charles. "We did pass here before, only then the door was open, and subsequent to our passing it closed."

"But," cried Ronny, "that's worse than having our mark copied! Who closed it?"

"You possibly, or any of us." He laughed outright. "Please don't be indignant with me. It's amusing that four supposedly intelligent people should have been so easily deceived."

"Suppose," said Rex with ponderous sarcasm, "that in the majesty of your intellect you condescend to explain."

Ronny cast him an annoyed glance. Such persistent discourtesy seemed needless.

"You mean," she said, addressing Charles, "that they are trick doors? They close themselves by a spring?"

"By springs or weights. Very likely pressure on some part of the floor in another corridor released this door so that it either slid across or dropped from a slot in the ceiling. The former, I'm inclined to think. If it slides horizontally, it might be opened again by similar means from another point. The sounds which reached us were the rattle of these doors, the faint thud of dropping weights, or the swish of ropes within the walls. Now we have only to slide the door back in its groove and pass on."

Probably he was right. That was all we had to do. But unluckily we couldn't do it. There was no means of getting a grip on the thing. At every side its edges entered floor, walls, and ceiling, and, of course, there was no handle or knob to grasp. Had the barrier been of wood we might have cut into it with a pocket-knife and secured finger-hold; but it was of thin iron or steel, and impregnable to any attack in our command.

Giving up at last we went back, investigated two or three other corridors, and soon found another of the trick doors which stood open.

A new meaning was given to the striped walls and black floor by our discovery. To the eye there was no difference between a half-inch black stripe and a half-inch hollow slot, while across the jet-colored floor the slot was equally indistinguishable.

There was no sign of a door-edge, the slot running all the way around, and having a depth past probing by the longest pencil in our possession. We, however, had cause to assume that door there was, no matter how deeply hidden.

"Our problem," said Charles, who seemed to have temporarily assumed command, "is to prevent this and any other such barriers which we may encounter from entirely closing."

Removing his wet coat he ruthlessly tore it into halves, wadded one half into a rough ball and laid it against the wall across the slot. From whatever direction the door might appear, it would become involved with the wad of wet cloth, which, acting as a buffer, would prevent the journey being completed. Given a grip on the edge, doubtless we might push it back without trouble, while, with the three coats among us, we could, if necessary, stop six doors.

The scheme seemed good, and to test it Veronica remained to watch while we three men walked here and there in neighboring passages. Of course we had no means of knowing exactly what it was that released the panels, but assumed that it was the weight of a person passing over some part of the floor. Taking care to keep within calling distance of each other, we walked with fingers running along the walls and eyes alert for the telltale slots.

I had just found one, and was about to sacrifice a garment at its altar, when I heard a swish, a dull thud, and then a call that was almost a shriek from Ronny.

Being nearest I was first in the rush back. There had been terror as well as surprise in that call, so that my first thought was of unmixed relief to see her standing unhurt where we had left her.

Then I perceived that she was staring downward with a white, horrified face.

"Look!" she ejaculated as I ran up. "And—and, Hildreth, think! I had laid my hand over the slot at the side. If I

hadn't merely happened to put it up to my hair—"

She stopped, her voice still shaking, and I didn't blame her. The others had come up now. Charles stooped and picked up a dank wad of cloth. Part of a sleeve fell to the floor. It wasn't half a coat now, it was the quarter of a coat. The soggy, wet material had been sheared through cleanly, as if by a tailor's cutting-knife.

"That door fairly shot down!" said Ronny. "It whistled past my face so that I felt a wind on my cheek!"

"With an edge like a razor." Charles dropped the fragment of cloth, and, hands on hips, frowned thoughtfully at the new inscription which our experiment had brought to view. It briefly and murderously declared:

Here I Will Make Thy Grave, for Thou Art Uile.

Thinking of poor Ronny's hand that had so nearly shared fates with the Governor's coat, I shivered.

CHAPTER XV.

A DEAD MAN'S LAUGHTER.

WITH hope resigned of blocking doors that dropped like butchers' cleavers, we rather disconsolately sought out the ways which remained open. None of us cared to voice the impression of senseless and, therefore, insane malice produced by our surroundings.

I have been told that there is no experience more terrible than for a sane man to find himself in the hands of a lunatic.

To deem oneself grasped by a lunatic dead months past, a man with not only the genius of insanity, but vast wealth to execute its malevolent devices, is, I can assure you, equally appalling.

By tacit consent, further speculation as to the labyrinth's purpose was avoided. Neither did we care to speak any more of the crosses, nor crosses and circles, smeared here and there on the walls. I suppose we shared the thought that reddish-brown paint was an odd convenience for a man trapped as we had been to carry—unless he carried it in his veins.

Who had wandered here, desperate, cut off by barrier after falling barrier, each offering its threat more virulent than the last, among endless vistas of painted bars whose illusion became ever more distressing as the eye wearied, with the echo of his own feet and the rush of the trap's machinery for sole companionship?

How had he finally escaped? Had he escaped? One of those knife-edged panels, dropping inopportunistly, might end a man's wanderings with frightful ease.

We turned no corners now without a quick glance ahead that feared the thing it might encounter. We made carefully sure that we passed no deadly slot unaware, and when we crossed one, did it swiftly and with discretion.

But so far the panels dropped only behind us, always out of sight in some comparatively distant corridor. That they were driving us on in one general direction was apparent. Yet we must let ourselves be driven, since the only alternative was remaining in one place, an inactivity that none of us cared to face.

We must go on, and we must keep together. Let one of those panels isolate a member of the party, and assurance that we should ever be reunited was disagreeably uncertain.

Occasionally, to leave no hope untried, we shouted or banged on the metal panels till the infernal racket deafened us. And all the while we knew our efforts in this direction to be utterly futile. Above there were many feet of heavy, sound-deadening earth. Had we been lost in the depths of a mine, the world could have been no more cut off from us. Moreover, we in our hearts knew that this had been so designed.

Charles and I were both in our shirt-sleeves now, for I had insisted that Ronny take my coat. She was thinly clad in a gown whose V-shaped neck and quarter-length sleeves offered scant protection from chill.

Physical discomfort was heavy on us all, and a sort of sickening distress caused by eye-strain. The black-and-white bars stood out, receded, wavered and danced in hypnotic revel till the mind was dizzy and sharp pains shot to the back of the brain.

Our progress was by no means commensurate with the distance covered. Again and again we traversed a series of ways which ended in a wall that was not a panel, but solid concrete. In each such case we observed that the motto was the same, though this was the only quotation repeated. The movable panels presented an astonishing variety of invective.

Its reappearance became irritating beyond belief; it was like a shouted taunt, echoing a dead man's mirth forever:

**I Also Will Laugh at Your Calamity; I Will
Mock when Your Fear Cometh.**

We made flippant variations on the phrase; we cursed it under our breath; we laughed loudly at facing it again—and ceased to laugh, because of the far-running echoes.

And then once more we must return on our steps, always to find panels where we had left open ways, and at last choose another corridor yet untried, and emblazon a fresh series of black "R. T.'s" beside those ghastly red-brown naughts and crosses.

By what means such a multitude of lights could be supplied with current was in itself a riddle.

Asgard Heights, as its owner informed us, had its private power-plant operated by turbines from a high waterfall within the estate. There was power enough and to spare for the house and grounds, but in this subterranean maze we had already passed hundreds of lamps. They were small, it is true, being mostly tungsten filament bulbs of low wattage, but the total current consumption must have been enormous.

I tried to trace a connection between the disappearance of the lights behind us while we were among the hedges and this underground illumination. The only basis on which I could do it was the assumption that, half an hour before our descent, some one had knowingly thrown all the power from the upper circuits into these lower ones.

This, unless we assumed a complicity on Charles's part which seemed far-fetched, was improbable. It implied a foresight of our actions nothing short of miraculous.

The question was suddenly dropped in the fact of a thing that affected us much more practically.

Our wanderings had ended.

Oh, no; we had not reached a broad, beautiful stairway labeled, "This way out"; nor a man-size rat-hole, that we might crawl through into open air, and which we would have welcomed with equal joy.

Our wanderings had ended, because there was no way to go on.

We were, in fact, safely shut within a small area of short corridors, blocked, every one of them, and each presenting that silent shriek of maniacal mirth:

I Also Will Laugh at Your Calamity.

First we made sure that the "calamity" was as bad as it seemed. That did not occupy us long. Then we strayed aimlessly about, on a pretense of making sure all over again, but really because we were afraid of a certain minute that was coming.

I mean the minute when we must look at one another and admit: "Here is an end of action. From this on we have to rely on a rescue from outside. Waiting is our part, and as we have neither food, drink, nor proper covering against cold—in this damp, cellarlike place—the wait is going to seem very long and hard to bear. We three men can stand it, but how about you, little Ronny?"

Of course that a rescue would finally come was inevitable.

No matter how secretly Mason had caused the labyrinth to be built, it had taken workmen to build it. Skilled workmen—electricians and artificers of various sorts, all men of intelligence. They might have been brought from far and paid well for silence. But such a man as Clinton Charles could not vanish into thin air without news of it being flashed all over.

Probably quite a lot of people would come forward then with the information that would send us help.

True, past denial. And, nevertheless—what if no help ever came?

Your fellow man is such an uncertain creature to rely on—when you can't do one thing for yourself.

We were cut off. We were shut under the ground, in a place concealed with just that devilish intent.

Nobody said much. We strolled around a while, and came to a halt beside the last panel that had closed, ending our perilous journey.

The chill air breathed heavy, laden with hopelessness and discouragement.

We looked at the panel. Tolliver kicked it, gently and without spirit.

The inscription upon it seemed to glare at us vengefully; terse, ruthless in its use here, insane:

Thou Shalt not Live, for Thou Speakest Lies in the Name of the Lord.

Suddenly Ronny began to laugh. I asked her why. She explained that the accusation of that particular panel struck her as quite amusingly mad.

As soon as she mentioned it, we could see for ourselves that it was funny. Several very witty jokes were made on the subject. I don't now recall what they were, but at the time they appealed to my sense of humor so that I laughed till my head hurt severely.

Strange how stifflingly heavy the air had become since the dropping of that last panel.

There were weights on my feet, too. Wondering how they had got there, I looked down and discovered the explanation. I was dressed in a sea-diver's costume.

It was, of course, the great, heavy helmet on my head that made everything dark except in two round circles before my eyes.

The figure of a girl drifted slowly by. Turning jerkily with the current, it faced me for a moment. I recognized Ronny's drowned face, strained, bluish-white, with gasping, open mouth and drooping lids. In spite of the old-fashioned cork-jacket buckled round her body, she had sunk to the very bottom.

Though I knew it was too late to save her, I stretched out my arms. Those lead soles wouldn't let me move, and she drifted out of my sight.

The round windows of the helmet began to cloud over, and the heavy air failed.

They had ceased pumping air to me. The windows darkened—I sank—

CHAPTER XVI.

THE RESCUE LOSES ITS HEROINE.

MY awakening from that dream is to this day a most unpleasant memory.

The odorless and insidious gas which had caused it must have been drained off soon after consciousness departed. Otherwise I should never have awakened at all.

As it was, I came to abruptly, leaping in one instant from insensibility to life. I was lying on the floor, but started up like a man roused from sleep by some loud alarm. My head, though it ached slightly, was almost unnaturally clear and memory took up its normal function as if there had been no break.

Huddled against the wall lay Tolliver, a dark, careless heap that did not stir.

Ronny was nowhere to be seen. Neither was Charles.

There were with me only silence, and that motionless heap of flesh and clothes which might or might not be a living man.

I didn't stop then to find out.

Some inhaled poison had robbed us of sense for a while. Though it had dropped two of us in our tracks, the others might have withstood it longer. They had perhaps staggered a little way off; they were lying insensible around this corner or that. The space of our prison had many corners to be searched.

Back and forth I went, running, anxious, like a lost dog questing its master. Where was Veronica? Charles might have gone to the devil in a cloud of brimstone for all I cared. I must find Veronica.

The unwelcome knowledge forced itself on me at last that the only people in this section of the corridors were Tolliver and myself.

Then I realized that I had known it from the first moment of awakening.

All that elaborate ignorance of the Governor's had been feigned by him and swallowed by us with the simplicity of children. Granted that our being entrapped was sheer

accident. It was an accident of which he had taken eager advantage. The labyrinth was Mason's, but its new owner had found good use for it.

If Tolliver and I showed up missing, who would ever look for us on the Asgard Heights estate? The only clues we had left were the two motor-cars, one hidden by the road, the other standing at the foot of that steep, apparently unclimbable slope on Kil-dair Mountain.

It would be another mystery as baffling as that of my cousin.

And Charles—the damnable hypocrite—would follow his ambitious way with a smiling face, not so much as breathed on by suspicion. Oh, a perilous road to walk, no doubt, but he had already given proof of reckless daring.

Honest, straightforward Tolliver, whom I had secretly deemed boyish and crude, had been possessed of clearer vision than myself. "But a short step from kidnaping to throat-cutting," he had said. In the dark I had smiled incredulously and Ronny had laughed outright. Poor little Ronny! She deserved sympathy.

Slowly I went back to Tolliver. He must be roused, and between us we must hunt out the trick by which this prison opened. Charles knew it, so the trick was surely there.

It surprised me rather that he hadn't smashed the light bulbs before going. Darkness would have left us no chance whatever. Well, that would come later. I could almost see the sardonic smile curling his fine mouth as his hand should close over the switch that threw off every light below here.

Death muffled in the dark for us; for him, safety—and my cousin, Veronica.

Stung by the thought, I fell upon Tolliver's inert form in a rage of determination. I hauled him away from the wall, straightened him out and, as an afterthought, felt for his pulse. It was faint but regular.

All right; since he was alive he could wake up and help me.

Some whisky had remained in his flask, which we had carefully refrained from using. I hunted through his pockets for it. They were empty. The pistol he had taken from Charles was gone, too.

There was something petty and sneaking about this rifling of a helpless victim! I smiled scornfully and plunged a hand in my own trouser-pocket, whither I had transferred Tolliver's gun when I lent my coat to Veronica. To my surprise the weapon was still there.

He had overlooked it, or else been frightened off by some move of mine that threatened returning life.

With a contemptuous shrug, I shoved the gun back in its place and set to work on Tolliver. The healthy tan of his face hid a sallow paleness, and his lips were a faint bluish-purple. The nostrils, too, looked thin and pinched.

I am ashamed to say that his condition aroused in me more of impatience than pity. In my fervor of anxiety for Veronica, Tolliver seemed less a human being than a means to help get out of here and find her.

And he wouldn't rouse. I tired of pumping his arms and rolling him back and forth, the only means of resuscitation my inexperience could recall. Finally I sat back on my heels and scowled at him.

Then I bent over, took him by the shoulders and shook him savagely.

"Tolliver!" I shouted. "Wake up, man! You—wake—up!"

"Do you think you are going about it in the best way, Wyndham?" inquired an anxious voice from behind me.

I whirled like a shot.

There stood Governor Charles, with the missing flask in one hand, a small liquor glass and a silver spoon in the other.

Where he had got the glass and the spoon didn't at once interest me.

To have the black-hearted villain you have been cursing show up suddenly is always disconcerting. To have him show up bearing the utensils and the considerate air of a hospital nurse is fearfully upsetting to one's nerves.

It upset me, physically as well as mentally. In turning so quickly I lost my balance and brought my hand down full weight on the midst of Tolliver's helpless person.

He showed his resentment by a deep groan and a kick.

"After all, perhaps your method is the

best," said Charles, "though I should never have considered trying anything so violent."

CHAPTER XVII.

SAVED BY THE VILLAIN.

"I BROUGHT this spoon and glass," he continued, "because it is easier to give liquor to an unconscious person from a spoon. Without spilling it, that is, and we have only a little left."

If I hadn't been through quite so much I shouldn't have given myself away. I would have accepted him and his spoon and his glass, inquired politely where he had the rest of the hospital concealed, and, in a casual way, if he had happened to see my cousin.

But the breaking point and little Hildreth had come together at last.

My thinking apparatus took a vacation. All the dark criminalities I had believed of him came tumbling out of my mouth in a jumble of heartfelt accusation. If I didn't accuse him of murdering Veronica and burying her under a corridor, it was only because my breath gave out suddenly. I sat down on the floor beside Tolliver, who hadn't even stirred again since that one kick.

The next I knew, some one was giving me whisky—out of a spoon, I think—and there was a supporting arm around my shoulders.

"You'll feel better shortly, Wyndham," a grave voice was saying. "I took that pistol because it was mine. I really have no use for it, however, and since you feel so unsafe in my company you are welcome to carry it."

I felt something cold and heavy thrust into my hand.

"Where's Veronica?" I muttered.

"Not far off. Are you better?"

"I guess so. Tired. Empty stomach. Haven't had a thing to eat in ages. Silly way to act—I know it."

"Not at all. Are you able to walk a short distance?"

"Tolliver?" I said.

"Oh, we won't desert him. Just lean on me—shall I carry you?"

"Cer'nly—not."

That one drink had got control of my tongue with surprising ease.

I suppose I walked, but I don't remember much about it. Next time I felt any interest in proceedings I found myself lying on something soft and springy, and my face was being bathed with a wet cloth. I opened my eyes and looked straight up into Veronica's face.

"Poor dear," she said softly, and then, over her shoulder, "Hildreth hasn't been strong since he had typhoid. If this leads to a severe illness, I shall never forgive myself."

"My fault entirely."

That was the Governor's voice. Evidently he had got me safely installed in his private hospital.

"Isn't that coffee nearly made?" Veronica asked.

"Just done. Shall I pour in the cream?"

"No. Hildreth likes it black."

Things seemed to be coming Hildreth's way. Into my range of vision stalked the Governor, looking solemn and anxious over a laden tray.

"I hope the bouillon will be right," he said. "I'm not much of a cook."

"It will be if you fixed it the way I told you."

I wondered if she were training him for a chef in case he lost his job as Governor, and just stopped myself from asking. I was recovering.

I had recovered enough to sit up by the time Ronny had fed me half a cup of bouillon—out of another spoon—and some coffee that possessed more strength than flavor.

"The coffee was ready-ground, and it stood too long in the can," explained Ronny deprecatingly. "Clinton did the best he could with it."

"Clinton is a jewel," I said. Then something struck me. "Clinton?" I repeated.

She flushed to the very tips of her ears.

"Governor Charles," she said stiffly. "I think you are better, Hildreth."

"Much, thanks to you and Cl— Governor Charles. In the language of the poet: Where am I?"

The room of my quick convalescence bore no resemblance to the black-and-white

striped horrors of our recent surroundings. It was a long room, not very high-ceilinged, but furnished in a taste that amounted to barbaric splendor.

It had, however, two characteristics which prevented me, after the first glance, from thinking it a room in the Governor's residence.

One was a total absence of windows. The other was the extraordinary condition of mildew and mold which existed everywhere, and rendered the absence of windows or other ventilation decidedly unpleasant.

I lay on what had once been a magnificent brocaded divan. Before putting me there, Ronny had thoughtfully covered it with a silk rug in rather better condition. Where the brocade showed, however, it was green with mold and the other furniture was similarly afflicted.

Extravagant expense and extravagant ruin appeared on every side.

The once highly polished floor looked dull, warped and spotted with moisture. The tapestry with which the walls were hung was stiff and cracking with mold, and in a trophy of Eastern weapons above my divan, the spear and sword-blades, were a red lace-work of rust.

Down the room's center extended a table. It had been laid with a lace and damask cloth and set out with a regular banqueting service, crystal and silver and a great silver urn near each end filled with dozens of roses. But the silver was tarnished black, the cloth eaten by mildew, and the roses had died long ago. They and their fallen petals were black as the silver urns that held them.

If they had only been a few skeletons sitting around the table, and a coffin or so set up for decoration, the scene of merry festivity would have been complete.

However, there were no skeletons—except those in use by ourselves—and the scene did well as it was.

Ronny, who had been putting dishes back on the tray, remembered to answer my question.

"We are still underground. I can't tell you any more than that, but it's something to have escaped from those miserable cor-

ridors. Lean your head back, poor boy. Would you like some creamed codfish?"

"Help!" said I briefly. "Why bouillon, coffee and codfish in the midst of decay? And where's your Clinton Governor gone now? He's vanished again."

"Hildreth, I wish you would please not tease me about what was merely a slip of the tongue. Governor Charles and Rex have both gone to put on dry clothing."

"Haberdashery establishment next door. Old Mason was thorough. I hope the tailoring department is in better repair than the dining-saloon, though. Say, Ronny, don't tell me I've been eating things that came off that table!"

"No, indeed. Governor Charles found an airtight chest with some canned provisions in it. There were an electric percolator and chafing dish and a few dishes there, too. And we found a case of bottled water.

"I don't understand anything. Governor Charles says that one of those 'calamity' walls was a door, and he woke up before any of us and it was standing open. He's been keeping it closed since, in case of another rush of gas. He carried me in here, and when I came to he was feeding me whisky—"

"Out of a spoon."

"How did you know?"

"Oh, I know. And then he went back and rescued me, and then he rescued Tolliver, and then he cooked dinner, and now he's arranging for a new suit for Tolliver, to replace the one spoiled in his lotus pond. Dear Clinton is absolutely indefatigable."

"Hildreth, you are horrid! It's not like you to make such ill-natured fun of—of people. If you didn't look so s-sick I w-wouldn't talk to you any m-more! What if I did speak of him as Clinton? M-mightn't anybody do that by mistake?"

"Yes," I conceded, "especially if it were a habit. May I get something from the pocket of that coat you're wearing?"

I felt like a brute, for there were tears in her eyes, but I thought the "Clinton" business had better be finished now. It might save trouble later.

She jerked off my coat and extended it with the very tips of her fingers.

What I wanted was in the breast-pocket.

"Here's your letter, Ronny," I said, handing her a fragment of note-paper.

She didn't faint, though she appeared pretty near it. Instead she sat down on the divan, put her face on my shoulder and began to cry.

Finished. Nothing for Hildreth but capitulation and wild promises of anything—the earth, the moon, the stars, Governor Charles's head on a salver—oh, anything in reason, if she would only be consoled.

None of my inducements were accepted, but the sympathy they conveyed had its effect. First she forgave me; and, second, I learned at last the real facts in connection with her disappearance from the Aldine Apartments.

At the tale's end I realized what an utter brute I had been. Her familiar use of the Governor's given name had led me to the verge of another error. I had again doubted that Ronny might bear a portion of blame and Charles be to a certain extent excusable. I learned otherwise.

The tale, of course, began with my cousin's secretaryship. Her new work, which touched on interests so much broader than anything in the real-estate business, fascinated her. Charles had found a fellow-worker rather than a mere clerk; they pulled together beautifully, and Veronica might have graduated to a full-fledged stateswoman if the inevitable had not occurred. Charles, who had never paid much attention to women—except those with votes in their hands—fell hard and far.

Over this portion of her story Veronica passed hurriedly, but I inferred that she threw Charles in with the work and allowed herself to be fascinated by both. They became engaged. In our rather democratic community there was no reason why such an engagement should not be announced, except one. The work. Once the romance was published Ronny could hardly go on as his secretary. The Governor's position demanded a betrothal of due length and a full-size wedding. Ronny suggested that their engagement be kept secret till he could find an efficient man to take her place.

Touched by her devotion, Charles accepted.

A week later their interest somewhat diverted from the mutual fascination of toil, two strong wills clashed violently. The clash's object was unimportant—as always—but Ronny didn't propose to wed any man who meant to be her master.

Charles was adamant; Ronny was flint. The romance was smashed by the impact, and my cousin returned to the welcoming realm of Mr. Carpenter.

Wisely determined that her young life should not be wrecked, Ronny allowed herself to be wooed and won by Rex Tolliver. He appealed to her, I inferred, largely because he was in every way Clinton Charles's opposite.

But this, too, turned out a mistake.

"What?" I ejaculated here. "Why are you marrying him, then?"

Her slate-gray eyes opened wide; her brows arched.

"I'm not," she said simply. "It was all over between us that night when he took me home from the theater. I think Rex realized that it was best. There was hardly a subject in the world on which we agreed. Anyway, he took his ring and left me without a word."

CHAPTER XVIII.

A WARNING.

"I—SEE!"

What Ronny had just said explained a number of things. Why, for instance, Tolliver was so concerned over a petty disagreement about the play. It was the why of his overdone jealousy, and of the sullen air he had worn ever since we found Ronny at the lotus pond. He had repented of letting her break the engagement, and had hoped that as a rescuing hero she would take him back with open arms.

The welcome, however, was bestowed on my unworthy self, and, come to think of it, she had not showered endearments on Rex anywhere along the line. In fact, she had most of the time kept close to me.

While these reflections raced through my agile brain, the story continued.

Charles, moved like Tolliver to repen-

tance, had sought to reestablish the entente. A little thing like her engagement to another fellow didn't deter him. With the wise knowledge of Veronica one would have expected from a man who had never met her, he baited his line with Asgard Heights. There entered my fragment of letter. But the letter she actually mailed to him said only that as she was soon to be married, she preferred that his attentions should cease.

Crushed, Charles retired from the field—to the side lines, where he proceeded to cook up a daring and nefarious scheme.

The only excuse I could make for him was that on this subject he must have been as mad as Mr. Daniel Mason.

Rex, after his final disagreement with Veronica, left her at the apartment door. Finding Mrs. Sandry asleep, Ronny took pains not to wake her. She was removing her hat in the sitting-room when the bell of the apartment rang. From the speaking-tube Ronny learned surprisedly that Charles was below and wished to speak with her on a very important matter.

With childlike faith—having then no idea of his true quality—she told him he could have three minutes.

The elevator had stopped two hours before. Charles walked up, met Veronica in the sitting-room and related his tale of woe.

Here again Veronica somewhat slurred her story.

"He told me of a great misfortune which had come upon him and explained how I could help him. It was all a trick—a miserable, contemptible trick—but I believed him implicitly. His car was below, and as I meant to return inside an hour, I didn't leave any message for Mrs. Sandry. I put on my hat again and went with him and—and he wouldn't let me come back! He brought me out here and ever since he's been doing nothing but argue—in what little time he could spare from his work. I've been alone all the rest, with no company but a lot of miserable Chinamen. Well, old Li Ching is rather a dear. I've spent hours talking with him—he speaks beautiful English—and he used to tell me long stories about the old Chinese gods and heroes. You've no idea—"

"Yes," I said, thinking the subject had

rather strayed, "but why did you go out with Charles at that time of night? How did he persuade you? Are you quite sure, Ronny, that you don't still—well—care for him?"

"Don't be horrid again. I despise him. He appealed to my pity and sympathy. I'll tell you the whole conversation another time. He and Rex will be back here in a minute. But I simply detest Governor Charles."

"Then, of course, you won't marry him."

"I—I can't."

"You don't have to. What's more, he is going to pay for this high-handed outrage with everything he cares for in the world. We'll force him to resign under threat of—"

"You won't do any such thing!"

She faced me, a high color in her cheeks, her dimpled chin well raised.

"But he deserves—"

"You don't understand. Governor Charles personally would neither deserve nor receive from me any consideration whatever. But it isn't fair to the State. He is the first decent, straight Governor we've had in ten years. You don't realize the work he's doing, Hildreth—"

"I realize that—never mind. We won't talk of it any more now, Ronny. Plenty of time for that when we're above ground. Did I hear you say creamed codfish?"

"Yes. I'll fix some more. This is cold."

I let her go, for I wanted to think, and the more I thought the more provoked I became.

Charles's recent amiability could be due to but one cause. A man as clever as he could not but have seen wherein his safety lay. Having lost the game, he threw down his cards with a great show of frankness.

"Here am I," he posed, "meek as a lamb and ready to take any punishment you choose to hand out. True, if you publish the story it is going to injure Miss Veronica Wyndham. You may depose me—send me to the penitentiary—I offer no resistance. Miss Wyndham has spent a week alone in my house with not so much as one woman for company. By all means publish. Certainly, take this pistol back.

Do you think I would resort to such crude means of self-protection? I am yours to command!"

I saw that Charles had left the pistol in question laid conspicuously on top of a tabouret close to my hand.

Picking it up carefully, I weighed it thoughtfully.

Just then a door at the other end of the long room opened and two figures entered.

Among the first symptoms of that poison gas had been delusion. Had some more of the gas leaked out and penetrated here? One of the figures was clearly a swashbuckling Charles I cavalier. The other was Hamlet, or the lord high executioner, or somebody that wore black tights and a long black cloak.

They approached nearer. Veronica, who was hovering over a chafing-dish, glanced up and said casually:

"Oh, you did find some things you could manage to wear. I'm so glad. Are they dry?"

Hamlet drew the conspirator-like cloak around him a bit more closely.

"Drier than those we took off, at least."

The cavalier swaggered over in my direction.

"Get in style, Hil," he grinned. "You can be anything from a pirate chief to little Bobby Shafto."

"Tolliver," I said, "let me be Haroun al Raschid. Which of the thousand and one tales is this?"

"The one, I guess. There's a roomful of giddy garb back there, but most of the costumes are in bad shape. They're the real thing, though. Look at these doeskin thigh boots, and this gold lace on the cloak is real. It's hardly tarnished at all."

"You have patches of mold on your doeskin boots, and your cloak is full of moth-holes. You look like a resurrection from a seventeenth century grave."

"Don't find fault. The conspirator there," he waved a lace ruffled cuff toward Hamlet, "has a hole in the back of his doublet as big as my hand. That's why he's a conspirator. The cloak covers it up."

"You're on friendly terms with him now?" I asked tentatively.

There was something in Tolliver's man-

ner that puzzled me. An indescribable air of swaggering indifference. Though his rival was talking to Veronica across the chafing-dish, the cavalier seemed not in the least concerned.

"Oh," he said, "there's no use fighting all the time. He's a good enough fellow in his way. You see, Hil—"

He broke off with a gasp, biting at his lip, and all the swagger was gone.

"I'll talk to you about it later," he choked, and strode off—in another direction from the chafing-dish.

His sudden emotion hit me hard. I knew the reason for it. Tolliver had given up hope of Veronica for himself, and had noted those same little reminiscences of intimacy between her and Charles which had deceived me. With a boyish generosity as headlong as everything he did, Tolliver had withdrawn from the field.

Well, I could protect my cousin without his aid.

I got up, a bit shaky, but strong enough, and meandered over to the chafing-dish party. I touched the conspirator's arm.

"Just a minute," I said. "You'll excuse us, Veronica?"

"If you'll hand me that can of cream—and the salt, please. Thanks."

The conspirator and I withdrew. He looked at me questioningly.

"Charles," I said, and the prefix was purposely omitted, "I have learned the full history of your—your proceedings in connection with my cousin."

"Oh! Did she tell you?" he murmured.

"Yes. Your cleverness will have informed you that for her sake you will go scot-free of the law. Her reputation is your shield. I congratulate you. There will be no publicity, but—here, take your pistol."

I thrust the automatic into his hand. He stared down at it with a very red face, saying nothing.

"I want you to have it," I continued, "in case I should catch you annoying my cousin any further, or speaking one word to her beyond absolute necessity. Should that occur—I wouldn't care to shoot an unarmed man."

Turning on my heel I walked back to

Veronica. When I reached her he was still standing there, staring down at the pistol.

CHAPTER XIX.

"EXIT."

THE finding of this decrepit but once splendid banquet-hall cast a different light on the purpose of the labyrinth. Multimillionaires in search of novel entertainment for their guests sometimes produce strange fancies.

The misuse of scriptural quotations to give a deadly thrill or so in advance of pleasure was an irreverence which would not have troubled old Dan Mason. He was scarcely of the church-going type.

Guests of the sort he affected would have stood for the deadly thrills if they got their fun out of it afterward.

I could picture a gay party gathered about that table when the black silver was bright and the roses were fragrant. How they would shriek with laughter as each new arrival stumbled in, sick with the fear that he had been inveigled to death in a madman's trap. How they would shoo him over toward the master of the wardrobe, to be invested with fanciful trappings and emerge as gay a masker as the rest.

The threat of mocking death—the rush of asphyxiating gas—the awakening—an opened door, and all to end in wine and merriment.

Rude play, it is true, but Dan Mason had risen from ranks where rudeness is a synonym for mirth.

How he had so pledged his merry victims to secrecy that not a word of the device leaked out was a question we did not try to answer. One suspected that the revels were of a kind not to be bragged of publicly.

However it was, the hard-faced old master of the mask lay quiet now, while mildew and mold ate up his pleasure hall.

I had a great longing to escape from all this dank decay and breathe clean air again.

I had resumed my coat, Veronica slung about her the white wool outer garment of a crusader's costume, and, heartened by food and drink, we set out to find the exit provided against the ending of the mask.

At first sight the banquet-room had but two entrances, one of which led in from the wardrobe, the other from the labyrinth proper. Above this latter door, on the inside, was written in letters of gold:

**If Thine Enemy Be Hungry, Give Him Food to Eat;
and if He Be Thirsty, Give Him Water to Drink.**

Mason's "enemies" had probably been served with something a good deal stronger than water, but the quotation was apt enough to pass. We left that and hunted along the walls, behind the rotting tapestry.

Our search soon met reward. Charles, who had been very silent, apparently taking my warning to heart, called out, and as I was nearest I reached him first. Tolliver and Veronica were then at the room's upper end.

He had drawn aside a cloth-of-gold drapery, and there, sure enough, was a door. It was an ordinary-looking door, with a brass knob and mahogany panels, and across it was printed in large welcome letters the one word: "Exit."

Charles took hold of the knob, but it wouldn't turn.

"Pull it sidewise," I suggested. "Most of these doors either slide or drop."

This one slid. It drew aside easily and revealed, not a passage or stair, but a small, square, bare chamber with another closed door at the far side.

Charles crossed toward it and I stepped in after him. As I did so I heard a sharp crash behind me and, wheeling, saw that the door had slid to automatically.

There came a rap on the outside and Tolliver's voice shouting:

"Hey! You in there! Open this up! I can't stir it."

I would have liked to oblige him, but I couldn't see any knob to take hold of. The word "Exit" had confronted the banquet-hall. This side was more voluble. It observed:

**The Simple Believeth Every Word, but the
Prudent Cooketh Well to His Going.**

"This other door is only a dummy, I fear," Charles sadly remarked. "It won't move."

"We're the dummies," I retorted sav-

agely. "Now what are we to do? Tolliver," I raised my voice, "can't you find an ax and smash this confounded door?"

There was no reply.

"Do you hear the groan of machinery?" demanded Charles.

"Of course I do. And the place is shaking like a factory. We've got to break out of here. Come on, put your shoulder beside mine and push."

Comrades in dismay, animosity was forgotten. He sprang to do as I asked.

And just then the noise and vibration stopped with a kind of jolt, there was a snapping sound and the door opened as it had closed, voluntarily.

We emerged.

The banquet-hall had magically vanished, and confronting us was a curving flight of white stairs.

With a contemptuous bang the intelligent door had shut again and didn't even offer a motto for our edification. There was merely what looked like a recess in the wall, covered with those eternal black and white stripes.

"I trust," said I, "that the lift or sliding car, or whatever the darned thing was, has gone back after the rest of us. It seems to me that Mason carried his jokes to the point of banality."

CHAPTER XX.

THE VILLAIN CONQUERS.

HOPING that "Exit" had meant what it said, though after a tricky fashion we ran hastily up the stairs. They led to the padded chamber beneath the pavilion.

Disappointed, but not despairing, we surveyed the ceiling. Presently, as the lighter man, I accepted the use of Charles's shoulders to examine that ceiling more intimately.

The embossed metal was worked into highly involved patterns, and I couldn't so much as find a crevice to mark the trap-door's boundaries. It wasn't thin stuff either that one could cut into and strip off with a pocket-knife.

After a fruitless hunt for some kind of

knob or projection that would slide like the carving on the pedestal, Charles politely asked me to descend.

"I'm going back," he announced when I stood beside him again. "If Veron—your cousin and Mr. Tolliver were able to follow the route we did they would have arrived by now. They are imprisoned in the banquet-hall. You can stay here, if you like, and try to get the trap open, but I'm going back."

"You don't say! And may I ask why I should let you go to her—you—and myself remain here? She is in safe company now, but—"

"Mr. Wyndham, you choose to be extremely insolent. Whatever her feelings toward me, Veronica is my wife, and—"

"Your what? That's a — lie!"

I jumped for his throat, but he caught me and held me off by the shoulders at arms' length. My strength had by no means returned, and anyway he was the more powerful man. I struggled. Anger had robbed me for the time of reason. The blood surged through my brain, and his face loomed hatefully through a scarlet mist. Staggering about, our feet sinking deep in the green upholstery, I felt myself jammed tight to the wall, and the pressure drove Tolliver's pistol hard against my hip. Ceasing to try for his throat, I reached for the gun.

It was in my grasp. His hand slid down my arm, but before it reached the elbow I had brought my wrist up and fired.

An automatic will shoot as fast as one can press the trigger, but I had time to press this one only twice. Then I was caught in a bearlike hug and fairly lifted off my feet. Half-smothered in the folds of the conspirator's cloak, I was swung round, and next thing found myself flat on the padded floor, staring up into Charles's face.

He had tripped me, twisted the weapon out of my hand, and now knelt triumphantly on my prostrate person. The two bullets fired had found a mark only in the voluminous folds of that cloak. I noticed that instead of reciprocating my effort to kill he had tossed the gun aside.

"Do you often go crazy like this, Wyndham?" he demanded.

I didn't answer. The first red mist had passed, and it was occurring to me that I had been foolish. I should have used the automatic to start with.

"If I let you up," he said, "what will you do?"

"Let me up and find out!"

"Thanks, no. Now, Wyndham, won't you be reasonable? You think me an utter scoundrel, and I'm not sure you are wrong. Still, you were calm enough before. What did I say that—"

"You lying hypocrite!" I snarled. "You referred to my cousin as—as your wife!"

"But why shouldn't I? I assure you the marriage was perfectly legal and in good form. She told you everything, so she must have told you that she entered into it willingly, even though under a misconception. Of course I lied to her—I've been bitterly regretting it ever since—and, of course, I did an unpardonable thing in bringing her to Asgard Heights against her will; but you must know—"

I went suddenly limp from head to foot.

"I don't know anything," I admitted.

"Let me up, please."

"You won't?"

"No, I won't. It's all over. I'm subdued."

He courteously assisted me to rise, and again we faced one another.

"I don't at all understand you, Wyndham," he complained, and there was a certain pathos in his voice.

"The Wyndham family are not to be lightly understood. When I said that Veronica told me all, I exaggerated. Comparatively speaking, she told me nothing. If you won't consider it impertinent on the part of an utter stranger to Veronica and yourself, may I ask when this marriage took place?"

"Monday night—or rather Tuesday morning. About 1.15 A.M."

"The Tuesday morning, you mean?"

"Yes, the fifteenth. I hadn't supposed that Veronica would wish it kept secret from you, or I should have said nothing. Too bad. I told Tolliver, too."

"Of course. Friend Tolliver was about to impart the glad news, but he was overcome by emotion and desisted. You have

such a casual way of announcing your weddings, Governor Charles."

"You are bitter over it, but that's hardly strange." He sighed. "I made a great mistake," he added sadly.

"It does seem that a slight error has been committed somewhere. However, as you suggested a while ago, we may as well hunt up the lost bride. Shall we try and open the door of that sliding car and make it slide back to the hall?"

He acquiesced and we did—try.

Like every other device in these lower regions, the door followed some sweet law of its own being, and was obdurate to all persuasion.

"I was afraid of this," said my companion gloomily. "We can only return by following our original path."

"Those closed panels," I reminded.

"That would be provided for. As the guests arrived they would pass through, as one might say, in series. Therefore, as one panel drops, another nearer to the entrance must rise. In that manner any number of people could journey through, and the trap remain perpetually in readiness. I shouldn't wonder—" He paused reflectively.

"Well?" I queried.

"That would explain the lights. The same mechanism that controls the panels may throw off one circuit and turn on the next. In other words, only a comparatively small number of lamps would be in use at any one time. Light follows the victim's wanderings about the labyrinth at a very slight expenditure of current."

"No doubt you are right," I conceded rather impatiently. "I'm no electrician. By the way, how about those other two archways? One of them may lead to an easier road."

"Impossible. Mason would not have offered any real choice, or the joke would have been spoiled."

"Nevertheless—"

"We can look, if you wish."

A hasty glance from one of the stairways in question showed that it led into the same system of corridors as our original choice. The other ended similarly, but to our surprise we observed, set on the lowest step, a number of objects.

They proved to be several bottles of fine wine, Chablis and Madeira, two jars of anchovies, three of pâté de foies gras, and six tins of French sardines.

"The butler grew weary last time he went to provision *Bluebeard's* chamber," I suggested. "His burden was left by the wayside."

"Put some of these in your pockets," advised the conspirator, as he stowed away a couple of boxes of sardines in the front of his medieval doublet. "We ate most of the provisions in the banquet-hall."

I complied.

"You are intending to live there indefinitely?"

"It is well to be prepared for anything. I am not sure," he continued, "that I should take you with me, Wyndham. Veronica was greatly worried when you fainted. She says your health is poor; the fatigue of the return journey might be too

much for you. Rest here, and let me go alone, and if I—er—shouldn't return, you can come on later."

Such anxiety was touching, but not so personal as it might have been. I could see in his eye that to him I was only a treasured possession of Ronny's—something she would hold him responsible for if harm came to it.

"My health," I said grimly, "is better than yours will be if you try to prevent my going. I'm not afraid of Ronny, and you are. I can hit you and you daren't hit me. Forward!"

Charles eyed me strangely. Either he thought I was crazy, or he was embarrassed that I had discovered his secret. No matter which.

The continual reversal of all the ideas I could gather concerning him and Ronny was enough to drive any man to mental irresponsibility.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK. Don't forget this magazine is issued weekly, and that you will get the conclusion of this story without waiting a month.



SONG TO SCOFFERS

BY MURRAY GARDNER BREESE

I HAVE walled myself in a woman's heart.

Now laugh, you lads! Say, "Nay,"

For laugh is Youth's prerogative

While the sun drives up the day,

And doubt, you dancing devil-may-cares,

For that is your heedless way!

I'll scorn you not, you scornful tongues,

But give you laugh for laugh;

For I've been one of your blithesome band—

Be it pageant splendid or chaff—

But *women* are many—a *woman* is one!

Now ponder this well and quaff.

I have walled myself in a woman's heart,

And the walls are not of deal,

But firmly muscled; apulse with blood

Keep me and my dreams enseal,

And moth nor rust may never corrupt

Nor thieves break through and steal.

The Labyrinth

by Francis Stevens

Author of "The Nightmare," etc.

CHAPTER XXI.

A TALE OF TOTAL DEPRAVITY.

TO prevent mistakes, we indited a message on the wall in three conspicuous places. Should Ronny and Tolliver arrive here it would be well for them to remain stationary. Otherwise, in seeking to be reunited, the lot of us might circle the labyrinth indefinitely, like a kitten chasing its tail.

Then, with the "Rejoice not" archway for a starting point, we once more essayed Dan Mason's tortuous entrance halls.

My just-revealed cousin-in-law had been right about the panels. We encountered no obstruction to losing ourselves, and in a few minutes were safely cut off from return to the padded cell.

It was too bad that on our first journey in we had been quite so thorough about blundering into every blind alley the labyrinth boasted. Rex's initials formed no guide to a short cut. In fact, we found it best to ignore them, and an intricate system of beautifully interlaced "C.C.'s" was soon added to the interior decoration of the corridors.

No longer did we shudder at the pathos of red-brown noughts and crosses. If some poor dub had used his heart's blood for paint, we knew that he had been consoled with champagne at the finish, and sympathy would be wasted.

As we strolled, laden with hope and sardine tins, Governor Charles laid bare the shameful story of his crime.

In Ronny's narrative I had been vaguely conscious of something important mis-

ing. It was just a little thing—merely the hinge on which the whole preposterous adventure turned. I could scarcely blame Charles for himself halting and stumbling over it, for his was indeed a weird tale to fall from the lips of a rising statesman.

It seemed that, made desperate by the approaching marriage of his escaped secretary *fiancée* to Tolliver, Charles determined that for the first time in his life he would resort to wicked subterfuge.

Offerings of luxury beyond the dreams, *et cetera*, having been declined with thanks, his astute brain suggested trying the opposite. He would do two things. Rouse the generous sympathy which was one of Ronny's strongest characteristics, and then rush her off her feet.

"What I wished," he explained, "was to show her the mistake she had made in allowing a trivial misunderstanding to separate our lives. I believed—I still believe—that in every important respect we are suited to one another as few people are."

Suddenly his rather spiritless manner dropped away. His face flushed, and his fine voice quivered.

"Wyndham, I love her. I loved her so. I couldn't forget her. Even work failed me. Day and night she was before my eyes and—I couldn't forget her. Then one day it came to me that ambition and the power to do are empty, fruitless things, that bring a man nothing but loneliness. It seemed to me—I was wrong, of course—but it seemed that, having labored so long and hard to safeguard the happiness of people with insufficient intelligence to guard their own, I had earned the right to take,

This story began in the All-Story Weekly for July 27.

if needs be by trickery, this single joy that I wanted for myself.

"It was false logic. Happiness can't be based on a lie, and if it doesn't come by free will it cannot be forced. I knew that, but I pretended otherwise. Still, if there really remained no love for me in her heart, my scheme must fail. On that basis I excused myself and carried it out."

With a nice sense of drama, he chose midnight for his debut as a deceiver. That Ronny had broken her second engagement the same evening, and been left at her door five minutes before his arrival, was mere coincidence. One of those little helps of fate offered the ingénue on the downward path.

"She allowed me to see her, and I told the story I had devised. Experience on the speaking platform is not so different from an actor's training. I think my manner was convincing, and she consented—"

"Look here," I broke in ruthlessly, "just what was the wonderful yarn that you told Ronny? It was carefully deleted from her story, but I'll be hanged if it's going to be deleted from yours without a protest. *What did you tell her?*"

He flushed again, and stammered like a boy.

"If you must know—well, to be perfectly frank—I believe I hinted that—you see, it was this way. I wanted her to marry me that night, before she had time to think about it or change her mind again. I told her that—"

Suddenly he plunged desperately, and managed to get it out of his system.

"I said that years ago I committed a crime in hot blood. That there was only one witness, a friend, who had kept silent, but that of late he had taken to drink and gone to the dogs. I said that Louis Berger got hold of him on a drunken spree, and by the offer of a large sum induced him to make a sworn statement. You know, by the way, Berger has played turncoat and thrown his railroad princes to the lions? He's a soiled tool, but Comstock agrees with me—"

"I beg your pardon. Would you mind finishing your other story first?"

Interrupting a Governor is bad taste, and

not always safe. But this was a thoroughly tamed Governor, and besides he was used to my interrupting him. He meekly returned to Ronny.

"I said that this friend of mine—this witness against me—had repented when sobriety returned, and warned me of his betrayal. It was too late, however, to save me from ruin. Not only my political career, but even my status as a citizen was lost. To save myself from a prison term, or worse, I must leave the country, and for the rest of my life play the part of a hunted criminal."

"But *what* did you say you had done?"

His embarrassment increased.

"I could think of only one crime that a man wouldn't dare stand trial for."

"Good Lord! Murder?"

He looked relieved at not having to say it.

"Yes. I had killed the man in hot blood, however," he added hastily.

"That undoubtedly saves your character. And as a murderer, Ronny of course welcomed you with open arms."

"Mr. Wyndham, no doubt this seems amusing to you, but for me it is serious."

"Yes, one would expect that. Pardon my levity. And Ronny?"

"As I had dared hope, she insisted upon sharing my exile. After demurring insincerely, I yielded, and since every hour's delay increased the danger of my apprehension, the marriage must take place at once. Then she could return to her apartment, pack a suit-case, and meet me at the Nicollet Street station."

"And I thought Ronny was intelligent!"

He looked resentful. "She is the most intelligent woman I have met. And just at this moment I can recall no man of my acquaintance who is her equal."

"Thanks. So the wedding took place instanter. But—why, Governor, who performed this ceremony? How is it that with the police on the trail, not to mention a hungry horde of reporters—"

"I'm coming to that. In a way, it is the most regrettable part of the affair, for it has involved an honorable and highly conscientious man. The Rev. Dr. Theodore Crowell, in fact."

"Ah! Well, why not? Yesterday I should have said—but we diverge. Dr. Crowell, then—"

"Understand me, he knew nothing until later of the duplicity that I had practised. While amazed at the suddenness and strange hour of the ceremony, I assured him that if he would not perform it, Miss Wyndham and I would only seek another clergyman. As an intimate friend of my dear father's, he consented, and we were married."

He ceased speaking.

"And then?"

"I told her the truth," he said heavily.

"She was not pleased?"

"She was—greatly annoyed. In fact, she expressed a desire never to see my face or hear my voice again."

"Naturally. Ronny could tolerate a murderer in distress, but not a man who had made her feel foolish."

"Was that the trouble? I hadn't meant that she should feel foolish. I merely tried to show her that her love for me really existed, and that, in the face of misfortune, she would go any length for my sake."

"You showed it. And then—"

"Then I lost my head. Instead of taking her home, I brought her here, and instead of relenting, she has every day grown firmer in her desire to leave. The moment that I heard your name, when you stopped me on the street outside my house, I knew that the end had come. I have never found surrender easy." He smiled rather forlornly. "I tried to carry it off, but I suppose I gave myself away pretty completely."

"You nearly scared your caller into suicide, if that's what you mean. It wasn't till three hours afterward that I had the remotest thought of connecting you personally with Ronny's disappearance." I explained about the fragment of letter which had put me on the trail, saying nothing, however, of the ignoble character of my suspicions. They were not the kind to feel proud of.

"So you knew nothing at the time of your call?" he queried. "I believed otherwise. In fact, I came home to-night prepared for anything."

"Even murder in earnest."

The words slipped out before I could check them. The moment they were uttered I would have given a good deal to recall them. In one clear-sighted flash there came to me the true meaning of that pistol he still carried. And Tolliver's angry expostulation at the pool—"I ought to have let him drown if he wanted to!"

Ronny had certainly made one beautiful mess of an originally fine and courageous character.

And yet—it wasn't really fair to judge her. It was not—fair.

"No," said Charles, as if he had read my thoughts, "all the wrong was mine. I had no intention to defend myself by violence. In fact, I had decided on a peculiarly cowardly way out—of which I should prefer not to speak."

"Unworthy," I dared, in a very low voice.

His teeth came together with an audible click. "No—cowardly." After a moment he continued, "The cold plunge I shared with your friend may have washed a few cobwebs out of my brain. The—the nervous tension had been running pretty high. I'm not apologizing—only explaining. You won't understand, but I *couldn't* let her go. Not till the very end was reached. And it's a rather queer sensation to feel your world sliding from under your feet. This is the full confession they say is good for the soul, Wyndham. I think that now you have the whole miserable story."

"Not quite. Dr. Crowell?"

"I went to him on the day following and told him everything. I appealed to him on the ground that should Veronica leave me in anger and tell her story my political career would be ruined. That was not my reason. What I really feared was that once away from me she would never return. Dr. Crowell, however, while deeply distressed, hesitated at injuring the son of his old friend. He consented to keep silence for a few days, while I tried to persuade Veronica. Fortunately, no license being required in this State, only Dr. Crowell, his daughter, and an old servant of theirs, whom he positively assured me could be trusted—"

"One thousand dollars reward!" I gasped.

"What did you say?"

"I said that the day of miracles has not passed—maybe. If I were you I'd go and hand a thousand-dollar bill to that remarkable servant. I'd do it first thing—the minute you're out of here, I mean."

"It might be a good idea," he conceded thoughtfully, "though it savors a bit too much of bribery. However, as I was saying, only Dr. Crowell and these two witnesses were conversant with the facts, and he has not recorded the marriage at City Hall. That is, he had not done so the last time we talked."

A look of startled recollection flashed across the Governor's face.

"Do you know," he observed, "just after your own morning visit, Dr. Crowell called me up. He said it was imperative for him to see me. I made an appointment, but was prevented from keeping it, and I have heard nothing at all since. I wonder—"

"That would be fine," I remarked. "I can just see to-morrow's papers."

There was a pause.

"I personally don't matter," he said at last. "My moral code gave way under the first real strain, and I should be forced to take the consequences. I suppose, too, that some other man can—will carry on my work as well as I. But Veronica—it is going to be very unpleasant for her if any of this comes out. What would you advise me to do, Wyndham?"

"The only safe way would be to destroy the record, strangle Dr. Crowell, his daughter and miraculous servant, knock Tolliver and myself on the head, drown Veronica in the lotos pond, and bury us all in the labyrinth. If you want any less drastic advice, you will have to give me time for deep thought."

There was a long, silent interim, in which both of us were plunged in reflections. Mine were curious.

As a scoundrel he had been startling but comprehensible. As *Sir Galahad* he was irreconcilable. And yet, after some strange fashion, I knew that it was *Galahad*, not *Garwain*, who walked beside me. I wonder

if *Galahad* could have found the Holy Grail if he had been burdened with a sense of humor?

CHAPTER XXII.

THROUGH THE LOOKING-GLASS.

"COME to think of it, she said she couldn't marry you, but I believe that's a mistake. It isn't bigamy to marry the same person twice. Any law against it in this State?"

He looked at me sharply. "No. What do you mean, Wyndham?"

"Under no circumstances can you afford to let this secret marriage business leak out. I doubt if Dr. Crowell has made it public without telling you of his intention. Ronny must go home and frame up some kind of yarn—or rather I will—so that the baying kiyoodles of the law will drop the matter without a scandal. Then you can be remarried with all the correct flourishes—"

He stopped me off by seizing my shoulders, whirling me around, and facing me with eyes that literally blazed like blue fire.

"Wyndham," he demanded, "are you on my side?"

"No," I said very coldly, "I'm not. I'm on Veronica's side. First you made her fall in love with you, then you drove her away by bossing her—except in a business way, Ronny cannot be bossed—you nearly forced her into a loveless marriage, played the mean trick of letting her make a great sacrifice, the meaner one of showing her that no sacrifice had been made, and crowned all by trying to force her forgiveness in ignominious captivity. The initial fault, however, was making her love you. With two people like you I suppose the rest was inevitable. You may repeat that I choose to be extremely insolent, but I've been through enough to justify—"

His attention had halted two sentences back.

"On your word of honor, Wyndham," he said slowly, "do you believe she loves me?"

"She says she detests you—and will take horrible vengeance on any one who dares

cause you inconvenience over this incident."

"Oh, that's for the work's sake."

The light went out of his eyes, and his hands dropped from my shoulders. Again we walked in silence.

"By the way," I said, "have we passed any 'R. T.'s' lately?"

"What? I don't know—we were talking."

"And walking—an unsafe combination down here. It seems to me we've come a very long way."

"Remember, you were tired at the beginning."

"I was tired so long ago that I'm rested again. We've come too far. And—I say, don't you hear some one shouting?"

We stopped in our tracks.

Silence, then from far off, muffled by many intervening walls, there reached us a long "Hal-loo-oo-oo!"

"Sounds like Tolliver," I ventured. I raised my voice in reply, Charles joined me, and we got an answer after a moment.

To set out in the direction of the hail was impossible. In the first place, it was hard to know where that direction lay, and in the second, our peregrinations were governed not by will, but by where we could find a way. Reaching Tolliver was a long and tedious business.

One thing we discovered with surprise. We had become so accustomed to failing panels cutting off the rearward road that we had ceased to note whether a passage was blocked by what Ronny had named a "calamity wall," or one of the steel panels.

Earnestly conversing on matters of grave import, we had given attention to nothing but Charles's liberally bestrewed "C.C.'s." Were a passage bare of these, we followed it. And thus, it now appeared, we had wandered into a region panelless, "R.T."-less, and even nought-and-crossless. Only Tolliver's voice, echoing through the waste, indicated that we were still in the region of the banquet-hall.

Our education, it appeared, was not complete.

Tolliver's voice indicated something entirely different, as we learned when, at the

end of a half-hour's steady hallooing, that gentleman met us at the turning of the way.

It was a distressed and mentally disheveled cavalier who followed his voice into our presence.

"Have you seen Ronny?" was his first casual greeting.

"What—do—you—mean?" Charles's voice was softly sweet—like a tiger's growl.

"I say, have you fellows seen Ronny?"

Then I perceived that Tolliver's casual manner was deceptive. He was speaking between clenched teeth in a desperate effort at self-control.

More or less in unison we explained to him the improbability of our having recently looked upon the lady in question.

"She was left in your care!" accused the Governor. "If you have allowed any harm to happen to Veronica—"

He didn't finish, but his tone implied all the lingering deaths of a medieval torture-chamber.

Tolliver, however, was too genuinely distressed to care for our opinion of him. It appeared that after we had been shut off by the so-called "Exit," Tolliver fled in search of some implement to break through. Failing to find anything better, he snatched up one of the great silver rose-urns, with which he meant to smash out a panel.

With Ronny urging him to haste—for they, too, had heard the grind of machinery—he had done that little thing. In fact, he demolished the door so thoroughly that it fell in splinters before his knightly arm.

"But the door went with us!" I objected.

"Double door!" snapped Charles. "Go on, Tolliver."

Disclosed by the smash, they beheld a concrete wall rising some six or eight feet beyond a black and yawning abyss. There was not so much as a rail visible for a sliding car to have run on.

"Overhead rails," interjected Charles, who must have had a leaning toward mechanics in his youth. "Electric motor automatically connected, self-starter, and au-

tomatic brake. That's all simple. *Where is Veronica?*"

Veronica, it seemed, had displayed unusual symptoms of hysteria. I believe that her remaining guardian had to restrain her by force from flinging herself into said abyss, whither she insisted that Charles and I had fallen to our deaths.

"You see?" said I to the Governor.

"You are very dear to her, Wyndham," he retorted with a melancholy shrug.

"Oh—rot!" Good little pal though she was, I couldn't see Ronny committing suicide on my grave. "Well, for God's sake. Tolliver, I hope you didn't let her jump in?"

"What do you think I am? Certainly not. I told her I'd make a rope of something and go down there myself."

So he got her to a chair, rushed to the wardrobe-room, and was back in three minutes with an armful of gaudy cloaks and garments from which the rope was to be constructed.

Then came real tragedy. Ronny had vanished. Cursing himself for a fool, the unlucky cavalier flew to look down the horizontal shaft. Nothing doing. A blank white panel presented itself, which when he assaulted it with the urn gave answer with a steely clang.

"That," explained our mechanical genius, "was the inner half of the door. The car had returned as it went, and if you had waited you could have opened it as we did and joined us under the pavilion. As it was, I suppose you had smashed the mechanism?"

"I don't know," mourned Tolliver. "There was nothing to take hold of. I battered both urns flat trying to break it open."

This explosion of energy exhausted, it occurred to our hero that after all Ronny might not have flung herself down the shaft.

Running along the wall, he jerked down tapestry in moldy billows, till he did actually uncover another doorway. It was an open arch. Hurling himself through it, he found himself once more in black-and-white stripedness. Frantically seeking Ronny, he rushed along, not troubling to R. T.

his path, shouting her name and hallooing from time to time.

As a result of this impetuous proceeding, the devious ways had soon swallowed up friend Tolliver. Therein he had wandered disconsolate, till our answering hail assured him that others than himself yet lived and moved in Daniel Mason's too labyrinthine labyrinth.

"Maybe when the car came back Ronny got aboard and was carried to the pavilion," hazarded I.

"Now, you must know that's impossible, Wyndham." The Governor was wearily patient. "We were there at least half an hour. The white panel that he saw was the car. If she'd been inside, she would have called to him through the door. What I fear is—"

He broke off, and we didn't ask him to finish. Had Ronny, in her temporary insanity, done the thing that Tolliver meant to prevent her doing? While he was in the wardrobe, before the car returned—

"Nonsense!" I ejaculated. "Here we stand like three fools, while Ronny is straying about somewhere all alone. Come on and find her!"

Brave advice, and eagerly taken up. Where we should look, however, was a matter beyond our choice. We could only—wander—and wander—and wander some more, shouting, hallooing till our throats were hoarse, and one would have thought that Ronny's name had echoed clear to Marshall City.

Let it not be imagined that the variety of the inscriptions had ceased with the falling panels. We met them continually—little, cheerful reminders like,

**Terrors Are Turned Upon Me; They Pursue My
Soul as the Wind.**

Or—

**Their Flesh Shall Consume Away While They
Stand Upon Their Feet.**

Oh, lots of variety, though we hardly bothered to read them any more.

It was a vile and twisted use for the Great Book, but the mind that had spent millions for such a purpose was too primitive to be judged by ordinary standards.

A suggestion that we separate received the gubernatorial veto. Charles had command now, and neither of us thought of questioning it. Seemed a bit strange, too. We weren't hunting for my Ronny, or Tolliver's Ronny. We were looking for Mrs. Clinton Charles—and I hadn't got used to the idea any more than Ronny herself.

In spite of us, we returned again and again over the same territory, making, I suppose, a vicious circle, or quadrilateral, or some villainous geometric figure.

"This is a hell of a joke!" our cavalier complained. "I hope that old Dan Mason—"

But it isn't necessary to say what he hoped for old Dan Mason. I hoped an unrepeatable thing or two for him myself.

Charles, however, didn't waste breath on anathema. As it was, though he had a fine voice to start with, it was pretty nearly worn out by the time we came to the place where we met ourselves walking along a corridor.

The device is as old as the hills, and wouldn't frighten a child. Naturally, it wasn't calculated to frighten three grown men. That's why we all stopped as if we'd been shot, Tolliver reached for his gun—which he hadn't got—and I heard the funniest little sound, like a gasping sob of panic. It came out of my throat.

Then we grinned for the first time in ages, and our reflected selves grinned sheepishly back.

"A mirror!" sniffed Tolliver. "Say, that's stale. By George, I do look like a specter of the Merry Monarch, don't I?"

"No—the Pretender after hiding all night in a tree."

"Veronica!" The cry was so sudden and sharp that it made me jump.

"Clinton!" came a faint little wail from somewhere. "Oh, Cl-inton, where are you?"

"I'm here! Where *are* you, Veronica?"

It seemed to me that Veronica and Clinton really ought to be reunited.

"Rap on the wall, Ronny," I called. "We can't tell from your voice where you are."

There came one violent thump. The mirror swung out and back.

Our reflected selves vanished into the all-where, and in their place stood none other than the Lost Lady of the Labyrinth, Veronica Wyn—I mean, Mrs. Governor Clinton Charles.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A HIDEOUS DISCOVERY.

DID this romantic couple, reunited after hours of terror, fall upon one another's necks?

Veronica cast about one-half of a beaming smile through tears in Clinton's direction; she swayed a similar fraction of a sway toward him.

I held my breath.

Next instant Ronny's arms were around my neck again, and her tears of relief were bedewing my shoulder.

I felt rather like a tailor's dummy—one of those wax figures that wears another man's coat.

Still, after all our years of comradeship, I could hardly shake her off rudely, and say: "Here, this is all wrong—you go and weep on Clinton. Can't you understand that you're tearing the very heart out of the man you love?"

No, it wouldn't do. Ronny must walk her own road as she'd always done, and if Governor Charles got stepped on—well, he would have to "learn about women from her," that was all.

I looked up. The back of a cavalier was just disappearing through the mirror doorway. Tolliver had gone to see where Ronny had been hiding. The back of a conspirator was moving slowly off in another direction. Charles was going to look for—oh, anything—his lost self-respect, perhaps.

"Ronny!" I said, in a voice I'd never heard speaking to her from my lips before. "Brace up! We've tramped two hours looking for you. Where have you been?"

She drew away, and her eyes had the reproachful, amazed brilliance of a baby's, that has been slapped when it expected to be consoled. Her rosy mouth quivered.

"Poor little girl!" said Hildreth, coming down with a dull, sickening thud. "Were you very much frightened?"

"I've had a horrible experience—perfectly horrible! If I hadn't found you again, I should have died, I think—where did Rex go? He didn't go in *there*, did he? Call him back quick, Hildreth! Quick!"

Fearing I knew not what dreadful trap, I sprang to the mirror door and shouted Tolliver's name.

He was not more than a couple of feet from the entrance, and my yell startled him considerably. He leaped through the door with the wild expression of a man called upon to defend his lady against dragons, saw that Ronny had not been assassinated, and turned on me in exasperation.

"For Heaven's sake, Wyndham, isn't there enough to get on a man's nerves without your yelling like that at him? What do you want?"

"I don't know. Ronny said you mustn't go in there."

"There's a dead man in there! He's sitting at a table, and he's dead! He poisoned himself—he read a letter—and Mr. Mason—the labyrinth—"

Suddenly Ronny pulled herself together, drew a long, quivering breath, and when she spoke again it was in the perfectly controlled voice which she reserved for matters of importance.

"You must not think that I gave way to fright because the man is dead. I've been conscious since the first moment of our entry here that something was utterly wrong. I don't mean the knife-edged, murderous panels, nor the malice written on the walls, nor any single thing that a person could see or touch. I mean a sense of something intangible and—and ferocious. It's lurked around every corner we turned. It fairly brooded over that horrible, musty old banquet-table. Do you recall how after a while we couldn't bear to speak of or look at the marks painted in—painted in red on the walls we passed? And how—"

"Ronny, you've been too long alone. There's nothing down here but our four selves."

"And a dead man—and a letter. Here—or no, I don't want you to read it yet. First you must see what I have seen—and then you—you'll know what I know."

Another quivering breath, and she caught at her under lip with her teeth.

Charles had come back.

"Wyndham, you stay here. Tolliver and I will find out exactly what is wrong."

"No," demurred Ronny with an abrupt return to firmness, "we'll all go together. For just a minute, when I first came out, it seemed as if all the—the horribleness were shut in that room beyond the door. But it's not. It's everywhere, and from this time on none of us must lose sight of the others for one single instant. I tell you, there's a vicious *intent* against us because—we've discovered his secret."

Ronny was talking so wildly that I feared her mind had suffered by whatever experience she had met in those two lonely hours. From the look in Charles's eyes I knew the same fear was on him. She was so bent, however, on our accompanying her that it seemed best to give way.

Crumpled in her hand were three or four sheets of paper, which we assumed formed the letter she had referred to.

Having examined the mirror, and made sure that it was simply a swinging door with no catch or provision for self-locking, we passed through. On the other side was a curving passage, painted in red for a change, and rather dimly lighted.

As Ronny's sole acceptable guardian, I brought up the rear with my arm in hers. Her little cold fingers locked themselves nervously around mine, but aside from that she was now rigidly calm and self-possessed.

We had not far to go. The passage made almost a semicircle and in the midst of it was an open archway.

"Don't go in," whispered Ronny. "I went, because I saw the poor man, and I thought perhaps he might have got lost here, and been half-starved, and tired, and fallen asleep sitting there. But I can't bear that any of us should cross the threshold again! Look!"

We had been looking while she spoke.

We saw a dim, circular room, finished in a shade of pale, greenish-gray. Around the wall, here and there, was fastened up a peculiar ornament—a sunflowerlike thing, of which the petals were dull-black with lighter patches of gleam.

In the center of the room was a round table, with a lamp hung just above it that cast a steady, downward glare, the only bright place in the room. Just under it stood a strange little rack of bottles. There was a partly filled water-carafe, too, and a dingily fogged empty tumbler. This latter was set close to the quiet, waxlike hand of the man.

That hand fascinated us. It was long, thin, fragile, and half curled stiffly, as if it had released the emptied glass and frozen so.

The man's hair gleamed white against the dull black of his sleeve. An old, weary man, who had dropped down in the chair at the table's far side, laid his head on one extended arm and fallen asleep. So it had appeared to Veronica when she first stumbled upon this hidden chamber.

Yet how had she ever been deceived? That hand—and the side of his face where it showed, with its slightly greenish, waxen pallor!

"The letter lay scattered in sheets," whispered Veronica, "on the table and floor. I was going to speak to him. Then I—I saw."

"And you gathered up those sheets and read them?" I gasped.

"Yes. First I ran away. I couldn't get far. I didn't know about the swinging door. It looks just like the wall on this side. I was shut in with—it. I kept going back and peeping through the doorway. I couldn't think what was dragging me there. I didn't want to go. Then it was just as if a voice spoke in my ear. 'The letter!' it said. 'The letter—the letter!' After a while I knew. It wanted me to read what was written on those sheets. I—I went in, on my tiptoes—very softly. It would have been so horrible, you see, if I should have—have waked him."

"Veronica, stop!" Charles spoke in his ordinary voice—a startling thing to hear when every one else had been whispering. He seemed to think so himself, for he lowered it before speaking again. "It's not like you," he continued, "to give way to fancy. There is nothing here to harm us."

"But there is—there is! Read the letter and you'll know. Read it!"

She thrust the sheets into Charles's hands, and we other two couldn't wait for him to finish and pass it along. We stood under the small electric bulb that lighted the passage.

Rex and I read with one eye apiece what the Governor had the advantage of holding straight before him. But we got on very well. The writing was in a large, bold hand, as easily legible as print.

At the top was a date five years old. The paper was commercial bond, with the letter-head of the Corporate Iron Companies, and in one corner the name of Daniel Mason, president.

As we read on, the rough, violent personality of the writer seemed to thrust itself out from every line like a discord jarring on stillness—the stillness of death.

It was addressed, "Bradley R. Fern, Esq.," and began without further preface:

You'll never read this letter till I've got you where I want you, and that's sitting right at this table in this room I've got ready for you, and with the fear of God—and me—in your heart at last.

And the best of the joke is that I'll be looking over your shoulder as you read, though you won't see me—or will you? Maybe you will. I hope so. I should like you to see me peering and laughing at you—as you laughed at me one time, do you remember? I see you do. Oh, yes, I'm standing here, looking right over your shoulder while you read. I'm laughing you down to hell, old man, do you understand?

You stole her neatly, with your butter-mouthed Bible talk, and telling her how she, living open and honest with me, would go to hell sure, because some other butter-mouthed Bible quoter like you hadn't said words over us and called us *inan* and wife.

We'd get to that likely, too, in a year or so. Those were rough days. It hadn't seemed to her and me to make such a lot of difference—till you drifted into camp and turned my wife against me. Yes, she was my wife, and all the preachers from here to Jericho couldn't have made her more so. But you took her away, and made her a thief in the bargain.

Mary and me had saved that two hundred together, and it was ours together. If I'd taken that money and drifted off with some other woman, wouldn't I have been a thief? Yes, I would, and that's what you made of her when you got her to take it and sneak out of camp with you.

But you "made her an honest woman" afterward, didn't you? You *married* her—and *she*

knew she was my wife, and all the preachers couldn't change that and let her be yours. You didn't make her an honest woman; you made her a thief and a— I won't say the word about Mary.

You was smooth and sleek and educated, and you sure knew your Bible those days, didn't you, old man? You know who they say can quote Scripture? Well, the regular devil didn't have a thing on you that way.

You used to fire off Scriptures at me; all the while you was plotting to do the meanest sin in the whole Book—steal another man's woman away from him. But I'll bet you've got enough of Scripture quoting about now. I've spent a lot of study and trouble digging out a few bits to keep you interested.

And you won't read this till I'm dead, so I can stand and look over your shoulder and read with you. I thought about it some before I planned this out. I wanted you to suffer like the damned, before you was dead and damned forever. And a man can't do that right unless he's alone. *You* shoved me that. I've been alone ever since, and if I had all the money and money-bought women in the world, I'd be alone.

So I wanted you to be alone, and, just the same, I wanted to be right with you, seeing you suffer, and enjoying every minute and every hour of it.

And how could I be with you and you be alone?

Why, just the way we've been ever since you sprung the trap I fixed for you. I'll be dead when you read this—and I'll be *standing right behind you, reading it with you over your shoulder.*

When you and Mary went off I tried for a while to find you. I'd got two bullets in my gun, both of them hungry for a mark. But I was broke—you'd seen to that—and I had to work, and you got off and hid pretty clever. It wasn't till three years ago that I saw you again, sitting up on a platform in the town-hall at Rochester. You was changed some. Your hair's white, and I suppose you know how good it goes with that sanctimonious, silly face of yours. But I spotted you in one minute.

Select councilman then, weren't you? Left the pulpit and gone into politics—rotten politics, where you belong. I don't know what you've done with Mary—my woman that you called your wife. Dead, I guess. Or maybe you deserted her and left her to starve, or worse. That's what seems most likely to me. Anyway, you've got another wife now; I found out that much.

I just read in the paper yesterday that you're going to run as candidate for mayor of Rochester. That's good. I hope you get elected. I hope you get to be just as high as you'd like to be, even if it's President. The better off you are, the more you'll have to lose. Can you see me standing here laughing at you?

I didn't know exactly what to do about you till I got talking with Signor Guido Bartoli. He's an Italian and he knows a lot. He's a devil, too, though not *your* sort. The *signor's* a big man, and a big artist in his way—that's landscape gardening—but the first time I met him, I saw in his eyes what sort of devil he was. So I cut pointblank and told him about you.

He helped me—for money, but he put something in the work that money couldn't buy, and that's pleasure. He enjoyed planning this underground maze for me, and setting in that silly, innocent hedge maze over it—the solemn yews that shade the secret tomb, he called them.

He got the workmen, too, a lot of dagoes, his own countrymen, who couldn't speak a word of English to tell tales, and thought Signor Bartoli was a little god on wheels. Bartoli and I worked together like brothers. I did it for hate and he for love—love of my hate, that could wait such a long time and take so much trouble.

Bartoli killed a woman at home, he told me—that's how confidential we got—and he's been mourning ever since because her lover escaped him by shooting himself when he heard the news. Nobody ever suspected Bartoli of that girl's death, and I should be surprised if they had. He's something more than an artist—he's got brains. And he's a devil—the sort of devil you taught me to like by stealing my woman.

When I'm dead you'll get a letter. Bartoli has it now. He'll post it from wherever he happens to be when he hears of my death.

It's a very clever letter. Bartoli wrote it, and you'll believe every word of it. And you'll sneak up to the Heights all alone—I know you, with your gold-greedy, woman-greedy fingers. And you'll spring the trap. You *have* sprung the trap, or you wouldn't be reading this, would you?

You've had your fun, and now I've had mine. Can't you hear me laughing over your shoulder?

You've been looking for a way out of here a long time, haven't you? Now I'll tell you the truth, you dirty dog.

There is no way out.

I've been in and out here many times, coming and going by the door you fell through, and *being mighty careful to leave that door open behind me.*

The only way you could get it open—from underneath—would be dynamite. Do you see? That's the way it's made. And no matter how loud you yell and screech, nobody 'll hear you.

How do you like being alone with riches, and splendid rooms, and fine, fancy clothes, with food that drops to dust in your fingers, and wine that looks fine in the glass and tastes bitter as loneliness and death?

Alone? You haven't been alone one minute since you fell down here—into hell.

Now drink your poison or cut your throat—do I care which? I've had my fun. Look up! Look over your shoulder! Do you see me—

DAN MASON.

Scrawled half across the page, the signature came like a savage, triumphant shout, or the crash of iron on iron. Though audible only in our minds, it echoed there as he had meant it should echo in the ears of Bradley Fern.

We didn't look over our shoulders. Our backs were against a wall, and I, for one, preferred it that way.

Governor Charles suddenly crumpled the sheets together in his fist. He stood very straight, and said in a loud, stern voice, the voice of a judge:

"Daniel Mason has committed a crime more worthy of a devil than a human being. That he committed it after his own death does not excuse him. He is a murderer in his grave, and every man shall know it!"

I don't know whether he was speaking to us, or to the presence that was heavy on us all—the presence of the year-dead Master of the Labyrinth.

I know that his stern, slightly defiant voice shocked my strained nerves like the touch of an electrified wire, and that Ronny cried out softly: "Hush! Hush! Don't speak so loud!"

And then the horror happened.

The dead man stirred.

First his waxlike hand quivered, and the long, thin fingers straightened.

Then the whole upper part of his body lifted, the white head rose, and the face stared straight across at us with terrible, wide eyes.

It was a thin, rather ascetic face, with the greenish pallor of death in every line. The mouth opened.

"I saw you coming in a dream," it said. "I am very glad, for it has been lonely enough down here, with only the unrepentant dead for company!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

A BENEVOLENT VICTIM.

THERE are occasions when it is difficult to keep the calm poise a man should hold in face of any humanly possible event.

In the first place, for a greenish-white corpse to raise its head and speak is only

inhumanly possible. In the second, we had all got our minds "set," so to speak, on this particular corpse being the sad remains of a stranger.

To see a ghost is bad. To see the ghost of a man you have supposed to be alive, and he, moreover, a person you have known all your life and thought a lot of, is infinitely worse.

It was Charles again who broke the tension. He strode into the room as boldly as if it had been the commonplace library of his own house.

"Why, Dr. Crowell," he said, "how long have you been down here?"

The "corpse" viewed his approach with a benevolent smile.

"Long enough to become thoroughly weary, Governor. I fear I am no longer young enough to enjoy such an adventure."

The old clergyman rose stiffly from the table. Charles grasped his hand, and as they stood together under that lamp I saw not one vivified corpse, but two. When the rest of us had somewhat dazedly joined them, I saw four. I suppose I was another myself.

But, of course, like every one else, I was so familiar with the ghastly effect produced by a nitrogen lamp that I wasn't the least bit frightened.

I hadn't been exactly *frightened*—well, to get on with the story, greetings were exchanged with relief on both sides. If the ghost of old Dan Mason was really present, it must have retired in disgust from such an uncongenial atmosphere of joy.

Ronny behaved like a good little sport. She laughed at herself unmercifully for the inhuman horror which she had conjured from Dr. Crowell's sleeping form, but we were not inclined to make fun of her. We recalled too clearly a few of our own emotions.

"I knew, though," said Charles quietly, "that the man was not Bradley Fern."

He must have caught a skeptical gleam in my intelligent eye.

"No, really," he smiled. "I was acquainted with Fern in his lifetime. He died last year. Yes, he passed out within a week after Mason himself. And I think we all remember about Bartoli."

Of course we did. Last spring's papers had been full of it, for the *signor* had been well known in Marshall City. Dan Mason had set a sort of fashion, with his Asgard Heights landscapery, and we have enough millionaires of the sudden and splurgeful type to have kept two Bartolis busy following it up.

Then with sad abruptness the artistic Italian had been wrested from our midst. Extradited, in fact, and hurled back to his native land. The murder of the girl had not been quite so cleverly covered up as Mason fancied.

"Ah, the hopeless futility of revenge!" mourned Dr. Crowell. "The wasted wealth and genius expended on this underground horror might have given pleasure grounds to ten thousand play-starved children!"

That is Dr. Crowell's special mission—getting playgrounds for children. I sympathized with his grief, but the imaginative picture of Dan Mason and Signor Bartoli gloating together over the design for a merry-go-round was too much for me.

"How did you come to get caught?" I inquired hastily.

"Through my own inquisitive nature, I fear." He turned to the Governor. "You will recall that you invited me to dinner."

"I did," Charles admitted. "But I phoned the Heights around five to let you know that I should be detained in town and couldn't reach here before nine or ten o'clock. Li Ching said you had gone to walk in the grounds. Later on he telephoned that you had returned to the city."

"I see. But Li Ching was mistaken. I came out early, as you asked me to do, but the—the person with whom you wished me to talk declined to see me."

Ronny looked him straight in the eye and smiled sweetly.

"I sent word that I would see you at dinner when Governor Charles should have returned."

He nodded.

"Yes, I believe that was the message. Having dismissed my hired car at the gate I strolled about the grounds for a time, enjoying the sunshine and the fragrance of the flowers. I fear that with old age ab-

sent-mindedness is creeping upon me. Being engrossed with a—a certain question which has been deeply troubling me of late, I raised my eyes to find myself walking between high walls of impenetrable hedge. I had become involved, it seemed, in a maze of endless extent and infinite convolutions."

Tolliver grinned.

"That's the best description I've heard for it, Dr. Crowell."

"Yes, I wandered there for some half-hour, calling out from time to time, till I reached a small, round building, beautifully constructed of white marble. Curiosity led me to enter. Within was a single chamber, and set in the midst of it, an empty pedestal.

"Carved upon the top of this pedestal in high relief appeared a quotation from the Book of Proverbs. I could see no aptness in its presence here, nor could I surmise for what purpose the pedestal itself was intended. The quotation, moreover, was incorrect. It is a very familiar one, and I could not be mistaken. It should have run, 'The heaven for height, and the earth for depth, and the heart of kings is unsearchable.' For 'kings' the word 'man' had been substituted, and its misuse, moreover, emphasized. 'Man' was not only carved in deeper relief than its companion words, but the letters composing it were of greater size and more elaborate design.

"Intent upon this singular deviation, I laid my finger upon the word, idly tracing its letters. To my astonishment it moved slightly. Here, since I was meddling with the property of another, I should have desisted. Instead, curiosity led me to see if it could be entirely lifted away. It moved again, but in a horizontal instead of vertical direction. A small sheet of copper was disclosed, but before I had time to investigate further, the pavement fell away from beneath my feet, and to my intense dismay I was precipitated into an underground vault.

"I need not go into the details of my wanderings since that hour. You, I presume, have with you a chart of these regions. I had none. While deeply distressed by the evidently malevolent use which had been made of sacred writings,

I soon came to take a certain consolation from their presence. They formed, indeed, a perpetual reminder that, whatever the ill intent of man, I was, as always, in the safe hands of my Creator.

"Later, when I passed from the musty and desolate banquet-chamber to this smaller room, and when I had read the missive there in your hand, I felt more inclined to pity than wrath against Daniel Mason. Consider it, my friends! He must have studied the Testament through and through, and out of those wonderful pages he could extract nothing but evil and a means for cruel revenge!

"I sat thinking of this." He smiled again. "It may have been childish, but I received the most vivid impression of his personality about me and—I talked to him as if he had been here with me in the flesh! I'm afraid I preached quite a sermon to Daniel Mason's ghost. If God lets such things be it may have done him no harm. Then, being very weary, I fell asleep. Your voice must have reached me, Mrs. Charles, for I dreamed that you were beside me in this room. I awakened, and it was very pleasant to see not one friend, but four, standing in the doorway watching me."

"Dr. Crowell," demanded Veronica suddenly, "did you find that box of canned food in the banquet-hall? You didn't, of course. It hadn't been touched. And you missed your dinner—why, you must be nearly starved! We'll have to get back into the banquet-room right away."

"There's nothing there to eat," reminded Tolliver. "We cleaned out the ice-chest, I'm afraid."

"Sardines!" I remarked dramatically. "Dr. Crowell, did you ever dine on sardines, minus all fixings?"

"I believe I could dine on sardines in their natural state, at the present moment, young man!"

"No, this is real luxury. Cooked and served à la can."

The conspirator and I stacked our spoils on the table.

"If we had only included the foies gras and Madeira!" I mourned.

"Never mind," consoled Ronny. "We may need those later."

This was the first hint Dr. Crowell had received that our presence here was as involuntary as his own. As minister to one of the largest congregations in the city, his acquaintance was wide. Though Tolliver and I had not met till six months ago, he had known us both since boyhood. Naturally, then, Tolliver's engagement and my relationship to Veronica were facts with which he was familiar.

What import he at first drew from our presence here, I don't know. Dr. Crowell's thoughts could not be too easily read. He had the tact of forty years' successful ministry in Marshall City and elsewhere, and so far, aside from a curious glance at the anachronistic costumes among us, he had refrained from asking questions.

The time, however, had come when some explanation must be made.

Charles felt it, for he began abruptly:

"We haven't a chart of the labyrinth, Dr. Crowell. We fell down here by an accident."

"You don't say! All of you together—why, how very unfortunate! Hildreth, would you mind opening this can?"

They were French tins, without any patent openers. I got out my pocket-knife.

"I'm the guilty man," I confessed. "My arm was resting on top of that pedestal, and in the dark my fingers happened to close on the fatal word. Guess you'll have to eat 'em out of the tin, Dr. Crowell."

"Yes, certainly. You'll lend me your knife? In the dark, eh?"

Suddenly Charles gave me one half defiant, half appealing look, turned his back and strolled over to the wall, where he began examining one of the sunflowerlike ornaments.

I looked at Ronny. She smiled sweetly and said nothing. I looked at Tolliver. He scowled; then he muttered something about finding out how Ronny got in here, and disappeared through the arch.

Clearly, it was up to Hildreth.

"Yes," I began. "In the dark. You see, we ourselves were lost in the hedge maze."

"A very easy thing to befall one, particularly in the dark. I understand."

"Yes. Tolliver and I came out to cail on Veronica. Of course you are aware that there has been some—ah—misunderstanding in regard to her marriage."

"Yes, Hildreth. I am fully acquainted with the facts. The ceremony was performed by myself."

"So I was informed. Well—the Governor felt that he owed us some slight explanation, and while we were walking about the grounds talking it over, we blundered into the maze. In trying to find a light switch at the pavilion I played fool, as I've told you, and since then we've been straying happily from place to place. Rex and Governor Charles had to change their clothes for what they could find in Mason's crazy wardrobe, because just before we reached the maze they fell in a pond—accidentally. Quite a chapter of accidents, but you know these things will happen. Have another can of sardines?"

"Thanks, no—though you open cans beautifully, my boy. And now all that remains to be done is for us to extricate ourselves."

"Just that one little thing," I agreed, "and our troubles will be over."

CHAPTER XXV.

A HEALTH TO VERONICA.

THE titanic revenge of Dan Mason had misfired utterly, so far as Mr. Bradley Fern was concerned. It was a pity that the old iron king had not troubled to consider that innocent people might receive the punishment intended for Fern. During his lifetime he probably saw to it that the pavilion was not meddled with. Or did he?

Dr. Crowell denied that any of his life blood had stained corridor walls in anguished noughts and crosses. He explained that the idea of marking his track had not once occurred to him. Mere chance guided his steps to the banquet-hall, which he entered, not through the gas-chamber, but by the open arch of Tolliver's later discovery.

Who, then, was responsible for the red-brown symbols? The question has never been answered, and possibly it was only an-

other device of the Italian's subtly fiendish ingenuity.

The air-tight chest of canned goods, not to mention the delicacies Charles and I had found on the stairs, were not explained by the letter. Mason's "food that drops to dust in your fingers, and wine that tastes bitter in the glass," hardly applied to this assortment of really excellent provisions. The letter, however, was dated five years back. In the interim he might have decided that agony would be prolonged by a slightly more sustaining diet. Or it may be that Mason had them to refresh himself on gloating expeditions to the scene of his proposed post mortem revenge.

The elaborate completeness of the entire scheme reminded one of that famous bombardier who "took a cannon to kill a lark." Bartoli had certainly grasped the opportunity to make a very good thing out of the twist in his patron's mind.

The "death-chamber," as we named the gray-greenlit room where we found Dr. Crowell, was well calculated to inspire a desperate man to suicide. The sunflower ornaments were formed of knives, their red-rust black in the greenish rays, but once keen-edged and bright. In the table-rack were bottles containing a charming assortment of deadly chemicals.

"Cut your throat or drink your poison," commanded Mason. "Do I care which? I've had my fun." Then the final fearful suggestion of his own invisible presence, and, as he had hoped, the end.

But the Rev. Dr. Theodore Crowell was not Fern. The kindly old man wore coat-of-mail not to be dented by any weapon in a monomaniac's armory. He spoke gently to the restless, cruel genius of the labyrinth, and dropped quietly asleep.

We had no doubt that, did we care to explore further, we would find other rooms than the banquet-hall, but any curiosity we had started with had perished some time ago. Our whole desire now was centered on escape.

"Whither away?" I inquired, stowing the remaining sardine-tins in various pockets. "If we play *Alice Through the Looking-Glass* as you did, Ronny, we'll only be lost all over again."

Just then our energetic cavalier came tramping back.

"The door to the banquet-hall," he announced, "had jammed. I've wrenched it open."

This was good news, so far as it went. Following the red, semicircular passage, we returned to mold and mildew. It appeared that Ronny, driven by an anxiety which she insisted was for me, had leaped up the instant Tolliver disappeared in the wardrobe. Seeking another exit, she found this one, it closed behind her, and, the wood being sadly warped, stuck fast.

She said that she rapped, pounded and called Rex's name, but he was too noisily engaged in flattening silver urns on the car-panel to hear her.

It was obvious to us all that the only quick, safe way to regain the pavilion was by the car.

Tolliver and Charles set themselves to seek out the mystery of its working, but my assistance was declared unneedful. In fact, I found that a reclining position on the 'dear old divan suited my energies better. Dr. Crowell went to encourage the toilers. Ronny sat down by me. I was touched by her loyal attachment.

"Ronny," I said, "don't you think you've punished him enough?"

"Don't be horrid again," she retorted placidly.

"I'm not horrid. I'm tired. We're all tired. I think your Clinton Governor is tireder than anybody else. You are ruining one perfectly good man, and the worst of it is, you love him."

Her gray eyes softened, became almost transparently brilliant, but she shook her head.

"Not any more now. He killed my love twice over, and it can't ever live again. He lied to me—deceived me in the most cruel and treacherous manner. I can't forgive him! Oh, Hildreth, I want to forgive him! I do—I do! If he had let me go of his own free will, I—I might have felt—differently. But he wouldn't—and now it's too late. I said I hated him, but that's not true. I'm so—so sorry for him that—that it hurts me—here!"

Her slim little hand—with the fingers

that from babyhood wouldn't bend back the fraction of an inch—covered her heart.

Charles's words came back to me: "You won't understand, but I *couldn't* let her go. Not till the very end was reached." It seemed to me that there was a certain unfortunate similarity between their natures.

"And yet," I observed, "you haven't appeared even annoyed with Dr. Crowell. He kept silent when a few words would have brought you help."

"Dr. Crowell did exactly as I asked him," she retorted surprisingly.

"What!"

"He telephoned me as soon as Clinton left him, Tuesday morning. I told him on no account to betray Clinton to any one."

"But, Ronny—say, if you could use the phone that way—by George, you're the most remarkable *prisoner* I ever set eyes on!"

"You don't understand. Clinton took advantage of me in—in every possible manner. He said the only way I could go was to ruin him by telling the police. That's just one more of the things I can't forgive."

"Well, as I remarked once before, Clinton is a jewel. He has a knowledge and an ignorance of you which are simply stupendous—both ways—and why were you so overjoyed to see me? If you had phoned, or sent me an 'at home' card, I'd have run out any time."

"I wish you wouldn't be sarcastic, Hildreth. You don't act like yourself."

"Part of me got lost somewhere in the labyrinth, maybe. I'm doing the best I can with what's left. Why did you accept a rescue by force with joyous relief when you could have had all the cops in Marshall City out here any time in the last week?"

"If you and Rex had been policemen," she said stiffly, "I should have sent you away without allowing you to interfere with Clinton. But I knew you would both do as I wished and keep silent."

"I see. Dr. Crowell, and Hildreth, and Rex, and I haven't a doubt, old Li Ching, the butler, would all do as you wished—everybody in the world, in fact, except dear Clinton. Isn't that the idea?"

"I shall leave you alone. Perhaps when you are rested, Hildreth, you may be in a better temper."

She left me with the dignity of deep offense. I knew she would probably never forgive me either, but somehow I didn't care. I was too tired.

I went to sleep for a while, and when I woke up Charles was standing over me, shaking my shoulder.

"The car is working again," he announced. "By bracing open the door, when it's at the other end, we can go back and forth as we like. Tolliver is trying his hand on the pavilion trap-door, and the others are with him. I came back after you."

"That was kind," I admitted.

"Veronica wished you to sleep as long as possible."

To his great amazement I rose and shook hands.

"Comrades in disgrace," I explained. "She's angry with me now."

"Is that possible?" In his eyes the final calamity had befallen me. "I hope you haven't quarreled with her on my account?"

"No; entirely on my own. What's that under your arm, Governor?"

"Madeira. I brought a bottle in case you needed some restorative."

"You have my vote from this moment. Shall we split the bottle?"

"Thank you, I rarely touch wine."

"Just one small glass," I implored. "For your soul's sake—a toast to Veronica?"

That corrupted him. I knew the mention of her name would.

And so we stood there in the decayed midst of Dan Mason's futile revenge, and drank a health to the fairest, most lovable woman I ever knew; and the most unforgiving.

CHAPTER XXVI.

RESCUED AGAIN.

ONCE more the scene changes, and we find ourselves in the well-known padded cell. It was as good a place to rest as any other, and a lot better than some. We could sit or recline comfortably on a cushion of forest green, imbibe, if we

wished, two sorts of excellent wine, and otherwise sustain life on sardines, anchovies, and *pâté de foies gras*—while they lasted.

Beside these advantages, however, it was hard to see wherein the pavilion subcellar improved on any other spot in our new home.

Mason's letter stated that nothing short of dynamite would open that trap-door from beneath. Mason seemed to be right. It added that shrieks, howls, and lamentations might rise thence in vain. Right again.

Unless the State's anxious voters should be inspired to come out with shovels and dig for their Governor, I began to fear that he would never hold office again.

The workmen who made the place? Italians—no speeka da Eenglish—scattered about the country, or back in their native land. Bartoli? Across the water, and engaged with troubles of his own. Anybody else who held the secret of that pedestal? The silence becomes ghastly—very ghastly.

We relieved it by an occasional outburst of hammering on the ceiling. Rex returned to the banquet-room via car, and brought the two battered rose-urns. With their assistance we proved the ceiling to be sheeted with hard steel. Its decorative and highly colored embossment wouldn't even dent. The noise we made was our sole reward—and why had Mason been so positive that no sound could pierce that floor? Anyway, there was about a chance in a thousand that some one would be there to hear it.

Between intervals of pounding we sat around and admired Veronica's courage. Poor little girl! I was sorry now that I had called her unforgiving. When Charles and I stepped out of the car we found her waiting there, all ready to forgive—me. I tried to pass it along, but the effort was wasted.

It occurred to me then that after all she had gone through a pretty bad time. If her love for Charles were really dead, it was unjust to be provoked with her. He was a man. He had made the bed he lay in. If Veronica starved to death in this desolate tomb, primarily the fault was his.

I became "my own nice self" again, and tried to forget that there was tragedy

among us more intense than starving to death.

"My friends," said Dr. Crowell, "let us bravely face the fact that before us there lies a terrible ordeal—"

And just at that opportune moment the trap opened.

Now it stands to reason that when this blissful event occurred there was only one person on his feet in the middle of the floor. That person went to sleep with unusual suddenness. Ordinarily I like to go to sleep, but not when I'm hit on the head by a half-ton of swiftly pivoting marble. The awakening is too painful.

To explain the opening of that trap, I shall have to retire some seventy hours through time, and introduce a certain humble gardener man. His name is unknown to me, but I can say for sure that it was something with a Li, or a Ching, or a Fu in it. He practised his profession upon the estate of a Governor-Mandarin-millionaire, and in due course of practise, he one day reached the center of a certain maze.

Observing that a few desecrating leaves had drifted within the door of the temple which stood there, our faithful unknown fastened up his hose and proceeded to clean up.

That temple was really in a shocking state. His neat Celestial mind recoiled from the dingy appearance of its sacred interior. A scrubbing-brush and pail supplemented the hose. In the temple's midst there rose a monument, doubtless erected to the Governor-Mandarin's grandparents. Certainly its upper surface bore a prayer, facing heavenward to the gods.

The prayer, too, was dingy! Shades of the Great Emperors, this must not be!

The scrubbing-brush flew. Not enough power to it. Up on the edge the disciple of cleanliness springs and kneels. Now! With all the power of wrist and elbow—in the name of the sacred dragon, what is this?

We know what it was—I've told about that carving trick often enough—but in the unknown Wu-Li-Ching-Wung's case, it didn't work quite the same. Being perched on the pedestal itself, he couldn't fall through.

The yawning depths closed once more with a hungry snap. Gingerly descending, the unknown fled. Then he bethought him of certain temples in the Flowery Kingdom, where yawning floors disclosed heaps of jewels, dangerous things to meddle with because of jealous priests. Here were no priests.

He sought his dear old friend, Wung Li, steward of household supplies. Wung Li thought well of the news. Together they returned. Reascending the pedestal, friend unknown demonstrated. By keeping his hand on the sacred word, the trap remained open.

Wung Li, courageous adventurer, took to himself a ladder and descended, and here I have to give a Chinaman credit for more good sense than could be found among five intelligent Americans. Perceiving at once that about him lay a duplicate of the hedge maze, or worse, and with a full belief that uncharted labyrinths are better let alone, Wung Li investigated no further. If jewels there were, they might very probably be guarded by the dragons of the under-earth. Let them stay there for him.

Yet, as Confucius doubtless said, an economical mind misses no slightest advantage. Here was a wonderful hiding-place, and if it hid nothing, why that was a defect to be remedied. Wung Li was fond of that which sparkleth in the glass, but Li Ching, only less in dignity than the Governor-Mandarin himself, had slight sympathy with his desires.

What a place was here for secret revels, and the concealment of nefarious spoils!

Within twelve hours the labyrinth held a cache of delicacies meant to assuage the cravings of two thirsty Chinamen. Sardines, anchovies and foies gras were thrown in, I suppose, for good measure. The Chinese appetite is exotic anyway.

Then came the terrible night when, with shrieks of terror, the Governor-Mandarin's lady was born off by ruffians, and the G.-M. himself vanished from the sight of his servants.

Did they, armed and valiant, pursue the ravishing miscreants? They did not. Switching off the ground-lights, that the security of darkness might add itself to their

flight, they took to the woods, and it was another twelve hours before the faithful Li Ching got them herded up to the house again.

After all this excitement, Wung Li's spirit stood in need of sustainment. Accompanied by the unknown, he sought their cache in the temple.

Li Ching, watchful and very much worried, wondered what the steward of supplies might want in the hedge maze. He followed. The rest is easy, but I regret that I missed seeing those Chinamen's faces when they looked into that hole!

The trap might well have been allowed to bang shut again, and the guilty ones started on a trip to San Francisco, save for Li Ching's restraining grasp on their collars.

As it was, the ladder of the wrong-doers served to extract the Governor, his bride, *et al.*, from subterranean retirement.

Me they bore sadly thence, convinced that my career had received a very serious check. Once outside the hedge maze, however—for which event I was probably waiting—I demonstrated such signs of life that they laid me down on the grass, where my opening eyes stared full in the face of a lovely stranger. It was none other than old friend Sun, whom we had never hoped to see again in this world.-----

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE LABYRINTH'S LAST TURNINGS.

ROLLING over, I sat up.

Round about there were gathered an anxious group of those with whom I had expected to share my grave. Charles knelt beside me, the—yes, the inexhaustible flask in one hand, a glass in the other, and wearing his best hospital nurse manner. Only the spoon was absent.

"I've missed something," remarked Hildreth intelligently. "Whence came these rolling lawns and beauteous beds of flowers?"

"A trifle light-headed," commiserated Charles. He cast an apologetic glance at Ronny, as if to say that this single thing was really not his fault.

"Oh, no," Ronny corrected him. "He

always talks that way. Hildreth, dear, does your forehead hurt you very much?"

I put up my hand. It encountered a lump that felt as big as Kildaire Mountain.

"My brains hurt worse," I murmured. "Last time I recall looking at you, you were sitting on a green plush floor, staring up at a sky-blue-scarlet ceiling. Now—"

"The trap-door hit you a wallop when it opened," explained Tolliver bluntly. "A couple of the Chink servants had been hiding stolen delicacies down there, the butler caught them at it, and helped us out. That's all."

Though terse, Tolliver's description of our dramatic rescue proved to cover the facts.

"Li Ching," the Governor assured me, "has gone to phone for a doctor."

"Then send some other Li after him quick!" I exclaimed. "No doctor is going to see little Hildreth at Asgard Heights. Can't you understand that it won't do? Why, old Billings has the police out now, looking for me. And Tolliver—his father is probably dragging the river for him. We've got to go home quietly—quietly; and drift in with an affidavit in each hand that we never so much as heard of Asgard Heights. Pardon me, Governor, but as a conspirator, you look the part a great deal better than you act it."

Veronica beamed on me.

"I knew you could be trusted, Hildreth," she kindly approved.

Charles saw the point himself. He hailed a slinking, pig-tailed figure—either Wung Li or the unknown—and sent him streaking off on Li Ching's trail.

I staggered to my feet. The sun was at the zenith, and it occurred to me how very many things must be done before he arrived there again.

"I'll have to come for you to-night, Ronny, after dark. Whether you and dear Cl—the Governor settle your differences or not, no one must suspect the truth of this affair. The most important thing is to restore you to Mrs. Sandry—at midnight, I think. That would be appropriate. Afterward—"

I stopped. The bump on my head must have interfered with cerebration. What

were we going to tell Marshall City any-way?

"Never mind, dear," Ronny consoled. "You'll think of something, so I sha'n't worry in the least. But is it really needful for me to stay here till this evening?"

"It is," I rather grimly assured her. "I fear the sun won't oblige us by setting before that, and you certainly can't leave by daylight—where you off to, Tolliver?"

He turned reluctantly. Maybe he thought I wanted him also to remain at Asgard Heights.

"I'm going for my car, of course—unless it's been stolen."

That was so. Though he had lost his sweetheart, he still had his automobile—perhaps.

"And afterward?"

"I say, Wyndham, what do you take me for? Let me know what kind of yarn you fix up—so we won't contradict each other. So-long."

He was off, striding down the hill, a remarkable figure of a moth-eaten cavalier; but a true cavalier, none the less. I reflected that his dust-coat would conceal the apparel from a prying world, and turned back to the others. They seemed to have become involved in argument.

"But, my dear child," Dr. Crowell was protesting, "what you propose would be very wrong. For you to return to the world posing as Miss Wyndham, and make no effort to have this marriage annulled, nor to seek a divorce, would be unjust both to yourself and the Governor."

"It doesn't matter to me," announced the somber one. "I should never wish to marry again in any event."

"Neither shall I. It would be impossible for me, after all that has occurred."

Dr. Crowell eyed that raised, dimpled chin reflectively. What he said next proved him to be gifted with unusual insight.

"Mrs. Charles," and the title was carefully emphasized, "your conscience may allow you to do this, but unfortunately mine does not. I have endured much through the reckless behavior of your husband. That I could put aside cheerfully if it were to any good end. But I can no longer be a party to these clandestine and undesirable

proceedings. On my return to the city, I shall at once record your marriage, and if any one inquires of me, I shall feel bound to make known the facts. What effect this will have on Governor Charles's position, he best knows, but my duty as a minister of the gospel lies clear before me."

Ronny gave him one awful look. His generally kindly face was set in the lines of a fanatic, who will sacrifice himself and every man on earth to the Moloch of his conscience.

Charles took an appealing step forward. "I deserve it," he said in a low voice.

There was a flash of white between the minister and myself. It disappeared, involved in the folds of the conspirator's cloak. All we could see was two slim, firm hands, locked tight round Charles's neck.

The fanatical look had strangely melted away from Dr. Crowell's face. He smiled at me.

"Try not to be more untruthful than necessary, Hildreth," he murmured. "By my recollection, you have an ingenious mind. Handle the reporters yourself. I am going to the house and lie down."

An ingenious mind! If he meant that he remembered me as a good liar, why didn't he come right out and say so?

However, the Rev. Dr. Crowell had departed, and I was alone with the conspirator and his kidnapped bride.

After some considerable period I went and sat down on the side of a wheelbarrow that a gardener had left there. Occasional low murmurs reached my ears. Their import could be surmised, though I had no curiosity. I was too tired.

I wished that the mysterious Li Ching, who had floated through the background of the last sixteen hours of adventure like an invisible Celestial wraith, might materialize in the flesh and offer me some matches. A full cigarette-case and no matches—old Mason would probably have given Bartoli an extra bonus if he'd had brains enough to think up such a tantalizing torture. Now, matches in themselves are a slight luxury—

Just then there emerged from the single statuesque group before me two radiant, unfamiliar beings. The lady angel beamed

upon me as if I, too, were a beautiful, beautiful stranger. The gentleman seraph strode over and grabbed my hand for no apparent reason.

He shook it up and down violently.

"She's forgiven me, Wyndham! Thank God, she's forgiven everything!"

I observed how nice that was, in words as cordial as I could think up. I tried to feel radiant, too, but somehow I was too utterly played out.

After a little more of this I inquired what they intended to do about the police and the reporters.

"It doesn't matter—we both trust you perfectly for that. I know that Dr. Crowell can be persuaded to keep silent—he can marry us again if he wants to. She's forgiven everything, Wyndham! What *can* anything else matter to me?"

"It matters a whole lot," was my stern retort. "What about my immortal soul that you expect me to imperil in talking to those reporters? Nobody's asked *me* to forgive anything. However, I do it most freely. As I seem to stand *in loco parentis*, pray accept my pardon and blessing."

Ronny looked from me to Charles.

"Don't mind him, dear," she deprecated.

"He never means anything he says."

Charles's reply was meant to be *sotto voce*.

"I understand him perfectly, Veronica. Behind his flippant manner he hides a very earnest and serious mind."

First it was ingenious and now it was earnest! The time had come for Hildreth to take his departure.

"When your next wedding comes off I hope you'll invite me. I'll be very quiet and good. Ronny, will you be ready to go this evening?"

"Do I have to leave here just the same—now? Don't look like that! Yes, I can see that it's necessary. But you're not fit to go home yourself, Hildreth. That lump on your head is terrible."

"Come up to the house," Charles invited hospitably. "Take a hot shower, a good breakfast, and sleep the rest of the day. I have to get in town," he added, glancing at his watch.

Then he frowned and shook it. I judged the timepiece had unfortunate memories of that lotus pond.

Now, I didn't like to say that I deeply distrusted his house—that, though unshaven, unshowered and unbreakfasted, I preferred to go off somewhere in the peaceful woods, far, far from the Charles ménage, lay me down on a carpet of leaves, and go to sleep. Also that I meant to do it. Down the slope of the hill a blue-smocked figure was moving. All Chinamen smoke opium. Ergo, all Chinamen carry matches. I kept my eye on the blue figure, and prevaricated glibly:

"My head's fine. Tolliver has gone after his car, and if I don't do the same with mine, some one will find it, and complications will increase. You be ready for me this evening, Ronny."

"Well—if you really feel you ought to go. Be sure and take some rest, won't you, Hildreth? Good-by. You've behaved like a perfect dear about everything."

"Yes, that's my nature. Good-by till to-night."

"Good-by."

I turned away.

"Clinton," came Ronny's sweet contralto from behind me, "last night, just before you came home, I was thinking about these verbenas. Now verbenas are pretty, but they're not exactly suited to this lawn of ours."

"Why not?" Clinton asked quickly. "On first looking the place over I told the gardener to put verbenas in along this walk. I thought you'd like them."

"Yes, dear, I know; but you see verbenas—"

I hastened my steps. If they were going to quarrel again, Ronny might find some one else to rescue her.

I had caught my Chinaman and realized my best expectations before I once more looked back. They were walking together toward the house. Charles's arm was thrown around her waist, and against the somber conspiratorial shoulder her hair shone like gold.

Evidently one of the two had yielded on the verbenas question—and I had a very fair idea of which one it was.

(The end.)